

NEPC Review: Decoding Progress in Reading Preparation (National Council on Teacher Quality, June 2026)



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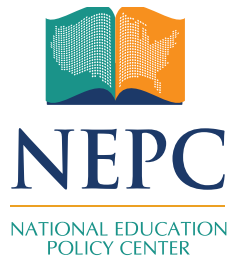
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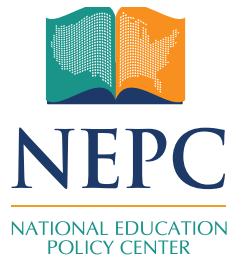
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Summary

A new report released by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) evaluates how well university-based elementary teacher education programs prepare candidates to teach reading. Of 700 programs reviewed to determine how much attention is devoted to five components of reading, “just over half” are found adequate. Therefore, the report calls on teacher education programs to better align coursework and instructional materials with “scientifically based reading instruction.” It further urges decision-makers to strengthen accountability measures and tighten control over university-based programs. While the report raises important questions about the use of research and science, its own alignment with rigorous empirical science is negligible. It offers unsubstantiated claims about how reading should be taught in teacher education programs and what policymakers should be doing, does not incorporate up-to-date research evidence, and deploys flawed methodology. Also problematic are the report’s apparent conflicts of interest, since it directs readers towards products and services offered by members of NCTQ’s various technical and advisory panels. Overall, the report narrows conceptions of reading, promotes de-professionalization of teacher educators, and undermines academic freedom in higher education settings. Rather than a scientifically based analysis of efforts to prepare reading teachers, the report substantively serves as an ideological attack on programs housed in higher education institutions. As such, its guidance is useless, misleading, and potentially harmful for policymakers.



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I. Introduction

Since 2019, under the influence of national media reporting, policy steering, and policy network coordination, 42 states have introduced literacy and reading instruction reforms¹ to better align with what is generally known as a “science of reading” approach. Such reforms affect the selection of instructional materials, require regular screening and diagnostic assessments, mandate interventions for struggling readers, and narrow professional development options for teachers.² They also call for the revamping of teacher education programs and greater use of teacher licensure tests.

In the United States, these reforms are a part of long-standing controversy over whether reading is best taught with a heavy emphasis on phonics or on meaning.³ Deeply intertwined with culture wars more broadly, these reading wars overlap with attacks on university-based teacher education programs long seen by conservative and far-right groups as sites of political indoctrination.⁴ Policy analysts critical of the science of reading movement have described current developments in reading reforms as a conservative takeover of classroom instruction and a move towards greater standardization and privatization of education.⁵

A recent entry in the debate comes from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), *Teacher Prep Review: Decoding Progress in Reading Preparation* by Ellis et al.⁶ The report reflects the conservative perspective, prioritizing the science of reading approach and severely critiquing teacher education programs housed in higher education institutions (HEIs) for, the report asserts, failing to effectively pre-

pare tomorrow's teachers to implement it.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report asserts that university-based teacher education programs have been moving toward a science of reading approach. More than half of the 700 elementary teacher preparation programs the report evaluated earned an A, but 47% were deemed “still failing to provide adequate reading preparation.”⁷ According to the report, when programs “don’t fully align to scientifically based reading instruction,” they contribute to an ongoing literacy crisis.⁸

The report also found that 77% of the evaluated programs address comprehension while only 65% attend to phonemic awareness—or children’s ability to identify and manipulate sounds in words. Another finding was that 21% of the programs do not provide candidates opportunities to practice either instruction or assessments related to specific reading components. Moreover, according to the report, 20% of the programs allegedly teach “practices contrary to the research,” including “running records,” “guided reading” or the use of specific teacher-administered assessments (such as Qualitative Reading Inventory or miscue analysis).⁹ The report further suggests that programs “provide little preparation in teaching reading to English learners, struggling readers, and speakers of English language varieties.”¹⁰ Although attention to teaching reading to diverse learners is deemed inadequate, it is not graded in the report. Extending its criticism, the report suggests that programs refusing to participate in NCTQ reviews may well be failing and “hiding from accountability.”¹¹ The report therefore urges policymakers to tighten control over programs in public universities¹² and shut down programs that teach anything that does not align with NCTQ’s version of science of reading.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report’s evaluation is based on NCTQ standards derived from the five components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (NRP) in 2000: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.¹³ The report’s methodology set benchmarks for program attention to each of the five components, and NCTQ hired reviewers to examine course syllabi and count relevant instructional hours dedicated to each. Programs falling short of benchmarks received lower scores. In addition, reviewers checked syllabi for practice opportunities and assessed tests, quizzes, and written assignments for the mentions of the reading components. Textbooks and articles used in teacher preparation coursework were also reviewed for the concepts and instructional practices they mention. Programs received positive

ratings if they used materials approved by NCTQ and lost points if materials they adopted mention practices that NCTQ deems “contrary to science.”¹⁴

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The premise of the report is that teacher education programs should update course content based on scientific advances and new research findings. This is a laudable and important aspiration that warrants educators’ and decision-makers’ attention. Ironically, however, the report itself fails to meet standards of rigor by cherry-picking sources and severely limiting its evidence base. The report draws primarily on educational media reporting, reports, and NCTQ’s own prior publications. Of approximately 47 references, only 17 are peer-reviewed publications. As a result, the report constructs a narrow conceptualization of reading and misses several important strands of research on teacher knowledge for reading instruction.

First, the report fails to consider the fact that extensive research literature exists demonstrating that reading is a complex social practice made up of more than just five components identified by the outdated and heavily critiqued National Reading Panel report.¹⁵ The conceptualization of what constitutes reading has moved past the report’s five criteria. Literacy researcher Nell Duke, for instance, described reading as a process that comprises such elements as:

phonological awareness, decoding and word recognition, word-reading strategies, comprehension monitoring, reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary strategies, morphological analysis, science and social studies knowledge, graphophonological semantic cognitive flexibility, syntactic awareness, text structure analysis, executive skills, genre knowledge, comprehension strategies, literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, critical comprehension, scanning and skimming, text navigation and search, reading stamina, facilitative reading attitudes.¹⁶

If teacher education programs focus narrowly on the five components in the NRP’s report¹⁷ and the standards NCTQ derived from it,¹⁸ teachers will be unable to cultivate strong readers in their classrooms.¹⁹ This narrowed focus was implemented in the United Kingdom a decade earlier and failed to produce long-term positive outcomes for students.²⁰

Second, the report severely underrepresents empirical evidence of what comprises the necessary knowledge foundations for teaching reading. It ignores a rich body of literature on the knowledge for teaching reading, which includes not just knowing what should be taught (like components of reading or language structures), but also how, when, and why to engage students with specific topics.²¹ For example, one

seminal publication pointed out the importance of teachers' knowledge of how students vary and how they respond to reading instruction in different contexts.²² More recent overviews of research on reading and reading instruction also show that oral language development, knowledge of morphology, and writing skills play an important role in students' reading development.²³ Because two decades ago there were too few quantitative studies to warrant inclusion in the NRP's report, NCTQ and its publications give them little attention or ignore them altogether. As a result, the report's evaluation criteria can penalize programs for following recommendations from most current empirical research and for incorporating components that contribute to children's reading development (writing, for example) but are not included in NCTQ's standards.

Third, NCTQ report misses an important body of research on how teacher learning and teachers' decision-making are shaped by candidates' experiences prior to professional training, contexts of instruction during their clinical experiences, and school-based policies after candidates graduate.²⁴ In other words, the report overestimates the impact of teacher education coursework and does not take into account the fact that teacher candidates' learning is always mediated by wider policy and practice contexts. Even research on professional development that prioritized teacher knowledge of language forms and phonics rules, similar to the approach NCTQ promotes, showed that increased knowledge of language structures or components of reading does not necessarily translate into improved teaching practices or increases in students' reading performance.²⁵ Other factors intervene and reshape the outcomes.

Finally, the report includes evocative case studies meant to illustrate successes in changing approaches to reading instruction and teacher preparation. While the report's storytelling approach may feel persuasive, no explanation or description of how the cases were developed or what evidence supports their claims is included. Yet, cases are presented as examples of exemplary practices as they simultaneously promote products and services offered by the members of NCTQ's technical and advisory panels—a point examined more closely below.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report's claims are based on the evaluation of teacher education programs' syllabi, assignments, and textbooks. No observations of actual teaching or preservice teachers' practice are included; neither are the outcomes of programs' performance considered. The methods are based on the assumption that an analysis of inputs, such as instructional hours or mentions of topics in syllabi, can serve as a proxy for what teachers know and the quality of their future teaching. These assumptions are flawed because these counts are insufficient to make robust observations about program quality; neither can they be used to predict program outcomes or effects on

student learning.²⁶ In fact, prior analyses of NCTQ's evaluations of teacher education programs showed no correlation between positive scores from NCTQ and the quality of programs, their graduates' teaching performance, or students' performance on reading assessments.²⁷

The report deploys the same flawed methods and faulty assumptions that have been cogently critiqued by numerous researchers, scholars, and policy analysts for over a decade.²⁸ For instance, the procedures of scoring are named and terminology like "randomly selected" is deployed to create the façade of rigor. In evaluation studies, however, the robustness of claims depends on the quality of measurement instruments deployed.²⁹ The report uses standards and rubrics that have not been validated or externally evaluated. Not only do these standards and rubrics fail to incorporate vast existing research literature, they also lack the support of empirical evidence. For example, there is no research that shows how many instructional hours should be dedicated to different reading components. Instead, only the opinions of advisory panel members or survey participants appear to justify benchmarks.³⁰ Therefore, scoring rubrics are based on arbitrary allocation of values rather than empirical data.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Narrowing the evaluation of programs to five components identified by an outdated report inevitably leads to the report's failure to examine how programs are attending to instructional practices known to be critical for students' reading development.³¹ Attention to such skills as oral language, morphology, and writing have been empirically connected to reading development, and their omission is harmful for students.³²

The report relies on rubrics developed in-house, with guidance from individuals representing think tanks, nonprofits, or vendors involved in the implementation of science of reading reforms or promotion of products rooted in specific ideologies. One example of an apparent conflict of interest concerns textbooks produced by members of NCTQ's expert advisory panel,³³ which are labeled "exemplary."³⁴ and programs receive highest points for using textbooks NCTQ identifies as exemplary.³⁵ Similarly, in its stories of success, the report mentions organizations with vested financial and professional interests in advancing oversight of teacher education programs, such as Teacher Preparation Inspection-US (TPI-US)—a for-profit organization that purports to improve teacher education programs through audits and inspections.³⁶ The technical advisory group providing foundational standards for the report included individuals affiliated with TPI-US and other organizations that offer science of reading products, such as Curriculum Associates.³⁷ These connections raise red flags about the impartiality and neutrality of the report's findings and conclusions. In particular, NCTQ awarded an A+ rating to the teacher preparation programs at Marian University after NCTQ itself provided technical assistance for reforming

those programs.^{38,39} In this way, NCTQ was essentially evaluating its own work while signaling that the way to get an excellent rating in this high-profile report is to hire them for technical assistance.

Beyond the blurred boundaries between public reporting and private gains from “perpetuating a failure narrative,”⁴⁰ the report advances the notion that HEI-based teacher educators, particularly at public institutions, cannot be trusted with the choice of instructional materials or course design but instead should be limited to mandated course materials and prescribed course organization. This undermines basic principles of academic freedom and deprofessionalizes HEI-based faculty.⁴¹

The National Council on Teacher Quality is an offshoot of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank. NCTQ has long been critical of teacher education programs housed in HEIs.⁴² Readers should keep in mind that by labeling HEI-based programs “the industry of mediocrity”⁴³ and extolling the virtues of alternative routes into teaching that are not subject to the same levels of rigorous oversight,⁴⁴ NCTQ has persistently supported policies that move teacher preparation out of higher education institutions.⁴⁵

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report offers no credible evidence for its extensive claims about how reading should be taught and what policymakers should be doing. Instead, it narrows conceptions of reading, deprofessionalizes teacher educators, and undermines academic freedom in higher education settings. Rather than a scientifically based analysis of efforts to prepare teachers of reading, the report is substantively an ideological attack on programs housed in higher education institutions. As such, its guidance is useless, misleading, and potentially harmful for policymakers.

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certain practices. Additionally, the report calls on states to adopt reading-based licensure tests, hold programs accountable for preparing teachers to teach diverse learners, and force programs to participate in NCTQ reviews as an additional accountability measure.

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