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**CONTACT**  
Lane Wright  
National Council on Teacher Quality  
[lwright@nctq.org](mailto:lwright@nctq.org)  
202-393-0020 ext. 700

## **MOST STATES USE WEAK ELEMENTARY TEACHER READING LICENSURE TESTS, PREVENTING THEM FROM KNOWING IF TEACHERS ARE PREPARED TO TEACH READING**

*Requiring stronger elementary teacher reading licensure tests can improve teacher preparedness and the quality of reading instruction students receive.*

**Washington, D.C.** – In a new analysis, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) finds that most states (29 states and the District of Columbia) use a weak elementary teacher reading licensure test, meaning that they do not effectively measure teachers’ knowledge of scientifically based reading instruction prior to entering the classroom. One state, Iowa, requires no reading licensure test at all. This shortcoming means that, every year, nearly 100,000 elementary teachers across the country enter classrooms with false assurances that they are ready to teach reading.

The data brief, [False Assurances: Many states’ licensure tests don’t signal whether elementary teachers understand reading instruction](#), provides the most up-to-date analysis on the quality of elementary reading teacher licensure exams being used by each state.

More than 50 years of research has illuminated the most effective way to teach children to read. It requires systematic, explicit instruction in the five core components of the science of reading: **phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension**. Preparing teachers to teach these five components—known as scientifically-based reading instruction—can ensure more than 1 million *additional* students enter 4th grade able to read *each year*.

Unfortunately, far too often, states allow teachers into the classroom inadequately prepared to teach reading. Licensure exams, if rigorous and aligned to the science of reading, can serve as an important guardrail for making sure teachers have this critical knowledge. However, many licensure tests are weak in that they do not adequately assess teachers’ preparedness to teach reading. Far too many states are using these weak tests.

“Every child deserves great reading instruction, but far too many children aren’t receiving it,” said NCTQ President Heather Peske. “As part of a comprehensive strategy to improve reading instruction, states can help ensure teachers are prepared to teach reading effectively by requiring stronger licensure tests.”

Examining every elementary teacher reading licensure exam currently being used by states, NCTQ looked for evidence that the tests adequately address the five core components of reading. NCTQ also examined whether these tests devote undue attention to methods of reading instruction that have been debunked by research and can hinder students from becoming strong readers, such as three-cueing. Additionally, NCTQ checked whether these tests combine reading with other subjects. This is important because if subjects are combined, the teacher’s understanding of reading could be masked. Using these criteria, NCTQ determined whether tests were strong, acceptable, weak, or unacceptable.

### **Key national findings:**

- Of the 25 elementary teacher reading licensure tests in use by states, the majority (15) are weak.
  - Just six exams are rated “strong” and four are rated “acceptable.”
- Across these 15 weak licensure tests:
  - Ten do not adequately address all five components of the science of reading.
  - Five combine reading with other subjects, such as social studies or science.

- (Note, one test fits into both categories listed above)
      - One includes too much emphasis on content contrary to research-based practices.
  - The majority of states (29 states and the District of Columbia) use “weak” tests that do not signal whether teachers have the knowledge they need to teach students to read.

“Teachers who aren’t prepared in the most effective instructional practices for teaching reading unknowingly enter classrooms ill-prepared to help students become successful readers,” said Peske. “This lack of preparation has a profound impact on students’ literacy skills and future prospects, especially among students of color and those living in poverty.”

Roughly one-third of children in elementary classrooms across the country cannot read at even a basic level by the middle of the fourth grade. The situation is even bleaker for historically marginalized students, for whom inadequate reading instruction is yet another barrier to educational equity, with 56% of Black students, 50% of Hispanic students, 52% of students in poverty, 70% of students with disabilities, and 67% of English Learners reading below basic reading levels.

Students who are not proficient readers are four times more likely to drop out of high school, face lower lifetime earnings, and have higher rates of unemployment.

## Recommendations

To address this pressing issue, the NCTQ recommends the following solutions.

State education leaders should:

- **Transition to a stronger reading licensure test:** States select and approve the tests that their teachers must pass for licensure. Requiring a stronger test will likely lead to better reading instruction in elementary classrooms across the state as preparation programs will be motivated to align their courses with the components of reading addressed in a stronger test.
- **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 should:

- **Shore up weaknesses and clearly identify limitations in existing tests:** Both major testing companies, ETS and Pearson, have strong and acceptable reading licensure tests on the market, but they 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.

## Resources

For additional information, please access the following resources.

- The brief: [False Assurances: Many states’ licensure tests don’t signal whether elementary teachers understand reading instruction](#) (Link will go live on 11/7. Use the PDF version in the meantime)
- Download [full dataset](#)
- View [list of states](#) with their corresponding reading licensure tests
- For more details on the methodology, including the topics considered within each component, as well as the scoring rubric, [see the report appendix](#).

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**About the National Council on Teacher Quality:** NCTQ is a nonpartisan research and policy organization on a

*mission to ensure every child has access to an effective teacher and every teacher has the opportunity to be effective. We believe a strong, diverse teacher workforce is critical for providing all students with equitable educational opportunities. More information about NCTQ can be found on our website, [www.nctq.org](http://www.nctq.org).*