ASHLAND UNIVERSITY | Dwight Schar COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

May 21, 2024

Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee, my name is Dr. Lisa Vernon-Dotson and I am the Dean of the Dwight Schar College of Education at Ashland University. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Science of Reading.

Specifically, I was asked to testify on Ashland University's adoption of the Science of Reading for our teacher preparation program.

As we all know, context is important, so I will start with my context. I came to Ashland University in July of 2022 from an out-of-state institution. My experience with structured literacy approaches dates to the early 2000s when I was a member of the Reading First Teacher Education Network from 2003 to 2005. This Teacher Education Network was a three-year initiative funded by the United States Department of Education which had a goal of focusing on engagement of teacher education professors in a series of collaborative seminars designed to enhance their knowledge-base surrounding scientifically-based reading research and provide explicit instruction teaching strategies that were to be incorporated into higher education curriculum and reading instruction. Scientifically-based Reading Research provides the vast, interdisciplinary body of research that is the basis for the Science of Reading. It's the science behind the Science of Reading.

As a new dean who was new to the area, I began visiting the P-12 schools where our Ashland education students were placed for their clinical experiences. When I talked to the teachers, principals, and superintendents, it became very clear that our students needed a much stronger background in the Science of Reading. I immediately met with all full-time faculty and adjunct instructors who taught reading courses in our College of Education and recommended that they receive training in the implementation of the Science of Reading. This was funded by the Dean's Office in College of Education.

During Spring of 2023, the College of Education Dean's Advisory Board met for its biannual meeting. The membership of this group includes local stakeholders such as superintendents, principals, directors, and ESC representatives. The major focus of the agenda was the overall preparedness of our teacher candidates and their readiness to teach when they enter the classroom, with an emphasis on their proficiencies in reading instruction. At the end of the meeting, the recommendation from the Dean's Advisory Board was to evaluate our entire reading curriculum.

With that charge, a Science of Reading Taskforce was convened. The group consisted of school district Reading coaches, a school district Reading supervisor, adjunct reading instructors and several full-time faculty and staff from the College of Education which included our two full-time professors of literacy. This taskforce critically examined the existing literacy curriculum against the tenets of the Science of Reading. From the larger membership of this taskforce, an ad-hoc committee redesigned and developed a series of four courses that align directly with the Science of Reading. The new curriculum was adopted, approved, and will be implemented in Fall 2024.

The new curriculum does not address any content that is contrary to research-based practices. This includes three cueing systems, running records, miscue analysis, guided reading, implicit phonics, reader's workshop, or leveled texts. Our programs focus on multi-tiered instruction, structured literacy, data for effective instruction, language comprehension, and rigorous texts for all. We focus on building our teacher candidates' knowledge and skills in teaching phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. We do not use books written by Fountas and Pinnell, Marie Clay, or Lucy Calkins.

To ensure consistency across the Science of Reading curriculum, all courses have been developed with a shared syllabus, activities, assessments, and resources housed in a master shell of our learning management system. The lead instructor works directly with anyone teaching these courses. Our assessments are aligned to the 2023 Ohio Reading and Literacy Standards and the 190 Foundations of Reading Ohio Assessments for Educators. We review both end-of-semester and annual data that is disaggregated by program, gender, ethnicity, and location. This is all part of our regular continuous improvement process for national accreditation.

Initiating these changes has not been an easy endeavor, but it has been a worthwhile one. Large-scale changes do come with consequences. As a result of these changes, one of our two full-time reading professors retired in January of 2024 and the other one resigned at the end of Spring 2024. We were fortunate enough to hire a new assistant professor who comes to us from Texas and has a background and expertise in cognitive science, explicit teaching, structured literacy, and the Science of Reading. We will be launching a search for another assistant professor with similar credentials in Fall of 2024.

Building the knowledge and skill of adjunct faculty in the Science of Reading was done through formal professional development. We are rebuilding and the new full-time faculty will have this expertise and background upon hire.

While we have made great gains in implementing the Science of Reading, there are things that we need to be sure we are successful. We need:

1. Access to the state-approved High Quality Instructional Materials (both curriculum and assessments). Our teacher candidates need multiple models to review and practice.
2. Ongoing partnerships with the schools and districts where our candidates can observe and work alongside K-5 teachers during reading instruction. Access to classrooms where our teacher candidates can practice with purpose is essential.
3. Resources and training on the alignment of coursework with the Science of Learning or the creation of a statewide Network Improvement Community amongst Ohio EPPs to discuss and support continuous improvement efforts around cognitive science and applying the science of learning.

My philosophical belief is that every P-12 student deserves access to highly effective teachers and a well-sequenced curriculum that meets their learning needs. As a former special education teacher, I am a long-time proponent of the Science of Reading and believe strongly in continuous improvement. The Dwight College of Education at Ashland University will continue to work toward effectiveness in incorporating the Science of Reading.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.