



May 21, 2024

Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee, my name is Laura Saylor, and I am the Dean for The School of Education at Mount St. Joseph University. Mount St. Joseph University is just 8 miles from downtown Cincinnati. It was founded in 1920 by the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati as a women's college and in 1986 we became co-educational. I spent more than 25 years in P-6 education as a teacher and principal before coming to the Mount just over 10 years ago.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Science of Reading and on Mount St. Joseph University's adoption of the Science of Reading in our teacher preparation programs. I am excited to share with you what our institution has done and is doing to implement the Science of Reading and to support others in doing the same.

As you all have been learning, as a state we must do better. Assessment results, like those from NAEP, reveal a serious literacy crisis, with nearly a quarter of our children struggling to read, particularly impacting those in poverty. Again, nearly a quarter of our children are struggling to read. This ongoing issue has seen little improvement since NAEP first began reporting achievement in 1971, but it is a crisis we have the power to change.

Reading skills are observable, measurable, alterable, and valid targets for change. We know how to improve reading achievement! We need to recognize the power of teachers, and we need make sure that they have the knowledge, the tools, and importantly the support to provide evidence-based reading instruction to their students. After all, and in the words of Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, "Every student deserves a great teacher, not by chance, but by design" (2016, p. 2).

In our work with educators, who have not been able to attend a program like ours, when they learn that they have not been teaching reading effectively, and were not prepared as well as they should have been, they often feel regret, embarrassed, ashamed, angry, and confused. Certainly, universities and state policy makers are in positions to make sure no teacher feels this way and no child suffers the consequences of a well-meaning but ill-prepared teacher.

Reading is highly researched by cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists, as well as educational researchers. We know a great deal about how to teach reading! So, one might ask, what's the problem? The problem is a serious and persistent gap between the science and practice.

Fortunately, there is growing awareness of the need to change, and teacher preparation is being examined and pressured to change. That is a good thing. Learning to teach reading according to the science is a rigorous undertaking. But it can be done. And it must be done. There is hope!



Our goal at Mount St. Joseph University has been to eliminate the research to practice gap and prepare teachers to implement the science of reading so ALL children learn to read.

I'll share with you where we are now, but then I'll let you know how we got here!

Where we are now:

- We have a 100% commitment across our School of Education to the Science of Reading
- Our core reading classes in our initial licensure programs are 100% aligned with the Science of Reading
- All faculty who teach reading courses have a Science of Reading model of practice and have rigorous training
- We have a robust Reading Science Master's degree program running six cohorts per year with waiting lists.
- We have a first of its kind Reading Science doctorate program also with a waiting list.

How it all happened:

It all started in the 1980s with a faculty member who was committed to the Science of Reading. In 2008, that faculty member with a former dean decided to start a master's program in reading science and hired Dr. Amy Murdoch to do so.

With Dr. Murdoch at the helm, the Reading Science program began in 2008. Over the next five years, the program quickly expanded, incorporating LETRS coursework, having a partnership with Cincinnati Public Schools, becoming accredited by the International Dyslexia Association, and going to a fully online program with enrollment of teachers from throughout the country. The partnership with Cincinnati Public Schools was crucial, leading to more than 250 CPS teachers completing the program which greatly enhanced K-3 literacy education in CPS schools. At the time, CPS went from an F overall reading grade on the state report cards to a C.

However, it was not until 2017 that our School of Education changed its teacher preparation program to be 100% aligned with the Science of Reading. A few things happened that led to this change. First, the superintendent of CPS urged us to do this as she saw the difference in that data for the students of the teachers who went through MSJ's Reading Science program. Secondly, MSJ was awarded a grant from the Ohio Dean's compact to create a dual-licensure program in special education and early childhood education. Of course, reading courses were a major part of the work involved with creating a dual licensure major.

At this time, we faced significant challenges due to leadership changes, declining enrollment in higher education, and faculty instability. Despite differing perspectives, a core group of us worked to create a common vision. Together we became very clear on our why and our purpose, focused on a few strong points for change, and critically questioned practices considering cognitive science and research.



This led to three key themes:

1. A focus on equity through strong instruction – our work needed to significantly address closing the opportunity gap
2. An understanding of the critical importance of our impact on P-12 learners
3. A commitment to using of educational research AND cognitive science in our decision making

This in turn led to ridding our courses of content that is not supported by the science. No longer would our courses include topics such as learning styles, the idea that reading is natural, or any tenants of whole language or balanced literacy.

We also decided that there was no room for error, and that fidelity was of the utmost importance. No longer would faculty be allowed to change courses according to their preferences. Courses now would have syllabi set with outcomes, texts, readings, and key assessments. A student should have largely the same experience with a course no matter who was teaching it. As a faculty, we agreed that we would share openly our syllabi and resources, and that they did not belong to us, but rather to our program and that syllabi were created for the purpose of assuring that our completers, our graduates, would and will positively impact students in P-12.

These decisions, let us to the foundational premises that our core reading classes would be based on. These include:

- Research from cognitive science
- Understanding of the essential elements of reading (The Simple View)
- Five key concepts: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension.
- Essential elements of effective instruction (instructional approaches that are based on research)
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (the application of data-based decision making)

And the result was courses with the following names for undergraduate initial licensure programs:

1. Foundations of Literacy
2. Phonological Awareness, Phonics and Fluency
3. Vocabulary, Comprehension, & Writing with Practicum
4. Reading Assessment, Instruction and Intervention
5. Structured Literacy Program Practicum in Oton Gillingham

There were difficulties.

Certainly, there were some faculty who were reluctant to make the change or who made claims of academic freedom. Those, we were able to navigate as was appropriate to those situations.



A key difficulty that we faced and continues to be faced by higher education is the lack of terminally degreed education faculty who possess the knowledge themselves around the Science of Reading. This difficulty was one of the reasons we began our doctorate program in Reading Science.

We could not have done it without support. Grants such as these really helped!

- Partnering with the Ohio Department of Education on a federal Office of Special Education Grant for Model Demonstration Projects for Early Identification of Students with Dyslexia in Elementary School provided us with additional expertise, more robust field placements, and a stronger understanding of curriculum that works.
- Over the years, we have also been awarded grants from the Ohio Deans Compact to deepen the implementation of the Science of Reading in our programs through partnerships with school districts to work on the science of reading implementation together. This includes work with field placements, professional development, and tutoring.

That brings us to where we are today:

In addition to what I shared as “where we are currently”, at the beginning of this presentation, I would also like to share that:

- Over the past five years our School of Education’s overall enrollment has grown by 46%. Teacher preparation is up by 32%.
- We independently track our candidates and have worked with our partner schools in doing so. Our candidates have very high retention rates. They report that they stay in the field because they felt prepared, and they know they are making a difference.
- Our Pre-Service Teacher Survey Results (from the Ohio Educator Preparation Provider Performance Report) revealed average responses consistently well above state averages.
- A thriving Mount St. Joseph University Center for Reading Science provides a service to the community by providing free resources, such as a preschool curriculum and webinars aimed at eliminating the research to practice gap. Our center website is <https://www.readingscience.org>
- The work of our Center for Reading Science includes extensive work in the higher education space. Our first project was at the request of the Ohio Dean’s Compact Literacy Steering Committee when they asked our faculty to create a model reading science curriculum for teacher preparation programs. Those documents have been used by many teacher preparation programs and can be found on the P20 Literacy Collaborative’s website as well as on our center’s website.
- Since then, we have worked with multiple state department of education and groups like the Path Forward. We have hosted multiple higher education, pre-conferences at the Reading League and International Dyslexia national conferences. We are currently supporting the growth of faculty knowledge in the Ivy Tech system of colleges in Indiana.



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In summary, Mount St. Joseph University was not mandated to make this change. However, there are those internally who did feel (at the time) as if there was a mandate. Importantly, the change would have been much more difficult, without the support of colleagues, P-12 partners, and funding support from state and federal grants.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. I have supplied answers to the questions provided in advance of today's hearing on the next page.

Sincerely,

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Questions for the Higher Education Committee

1. How are you building the knowledge and skill of your faculty in the science of reading?
At this point, our faculty are extremely knowledgeable and skilled in the science of reading. We stay abreast of the literature. We have a book club. We also take advantage of the offerings from our Mount St. Joseph University Center for Reading Science.
<https://www.readingscience.org/>
2. How are you ensuring consistency between courses taught by different professors regarding the science of reading?
We have standardized our syllabi and do not allow for larger variances among different faculty who may teach different sections of courses.
3. How do you know your preservice teachers are being well prepared to teach the science of reading?
 1. What assessment data do you analyze?
Key assessments in courses
OAE Foundations of Reading (190) pass rates and scores
 2. What systems of continuous improvement do you use to ensure effective faculty use of the science of reading?
Syllabi fidelity checks
Blackboard fidelity checks
4. Are you teaching your preservice teachers three cueing as part of their coursework leading to licensure?
NO.
5. Do you use as required texts in your reading coursework books written by any of these authors: Marie Clay, Fountas and Pinnell, or Lucy Calkins?
NO.
6. Do you teach a structured literacy approach, and, if so, to what degree do you feel as though your students understand the approach?
Yes! Our students understand the approach very well. They have commented on success during fieldwork, and in practice after completing the teacher preparation program. They are well-versed and often help veteran teachers understand the science.
7. Do you have your preservice teachers learn how to use running records as part of the battery of assessments that you use in their coursework leading to licensure?
NO.