



Invited Testimony to the House Higher Education Commission

Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today about how the University of Dayton is implementing the science of reading throughout our undergraduate and graduate programs. My name is Dr. Mary-Kate Sableski, and I am the Leary Chair for Innovation in Education, Health, and Wellness, and the coordinator of the Reading Program, in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Dayton.

Teaching reading has long been an issue of debate in both the research literature and media. These debates have found their way into the legislature, schools, and teacher prep programs. At the University of Dayton, we aim to implement a reasoned perspective to these debates, focused on the research, state requirements, and those who matter most: teachers and their students.

Our trajectory over the past nine years in our programs at the University of Dayton is a story of growth and collaboration. Our primary initiatives and our approach to preparing our candidates to be effective teachers of reading is grounded in the deep knowledge and experience of our faculty. I work with amazing colleagues in the Department of Teacher Education who share this mission and perspective. We are grateful to the Ohio Deans Compact, the Ohio Department of Higher Education, and our colleagues at institutions across Ohio for the support and collegiality in developing and implementing each of these initiatives.

To describe our programs, I am going to use an example of a high-quality, complex text that might be used in classrooms implementing the effective approach to reading instruction we are focused on, aligned with Ohio's Plan to Raise Literacy Achievement and grounded in rigorous, scientific research.

Watercress, written by Andrea Wang and illustrated by Jason Chin (2021), is an award-winning picture book about the daughter of Chinese immigrants, grappling to understand how her heritage fits into her identity as an American girl. The text is lyrical and complex, and the illustrations and words integrate to tell a multi-layered story. Here is how the text begins: "We are in the old Pontiac, the red paint faded by years of glinting Ohio sun, pelting rain, and biting snow." Now, most of us live in Ohio, so we know exactly what the narrator means by the way the sun, the rain, and the snow can affect our cars. I have never been in an old Pontiac, but I do have memories of sitting in the "way back" of our green Ford station wagon on long car trips. The illustration reveals even more information about the story – there is a far-away look in the girl's eyes, a certain set of her mouth, her sibling sitting next to her, and even the flag shown on the side of the barn tells me details about the setting I could not derive from the printed text alone. To identify these details, I decoded the words on the page, and then relied on my background knowledge and vocabulary to build my comprehension of the story.

Vocabulary and background knowledge are two critical determinants of reading comprehension, particularly for students in the intermediate and upper grade levels (Duke, et al, 2021; Smith, et al, 2021). This past year, our faculty engaged in an in-depth study of our coursework in adolescent literacy with the support of an Ohio Deans Compact grant. We examined our coursework for evidence of instruction that would, for example, prepare candidates to deliver read alouds of complex texts like *Watercress*, so students can practice these foundational skills with support of a knowledgeable teacher. We revised our coursework to include assessments, course texts, and clinical experiences aligned with Ohio's Plan and with recent research, focused on developing foundational skills along with knowledge. Teaching reading requires an in-depth understanding of language, motivation, engagement, and student identity (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), and through our coursework at both the



undergraduate and graduate level, we work to make certain teachers develop and strengthen this knowledge base.

In *Watercress*, the family is driving along, when the parents spot something on the side of the road. The text reads, “Dad’s eyes grow wide. Watercress! They exclaim, two voices heavy with memories.” The family pulls over, and the children find out that watercress is a food from their parents’ childhoods in China. The text reads, “From the depths of the trunk, they unearth a brown paper bag, rusty scissors, and a longing for China.” The family proceeds to gather the watercress from the side of the road, and bring it home to eat for dinner.

The little girl is horrified by the idea of eating the watercress for dinner. As an American girl growing up with Chinese parents, appearing different from her peers feels scary. The illustration reveals these details with clarity, and by reading the words on the page, and making inferences as to how their meaning supports the illustrations, the reader can understand how the girl feels – and probably connect to their own experiences. At school, she is teased for dressing and eating differently from her peers. As a reader, using both my skills in word recognition as well as my skills in language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Scarborough, 2001), I now understand why the watercress is such an issue for her. Negative experiences at school stay with children, and affect their lives at home.

For many children, learning to read is a foundational, positive experience of their early elementary years. But for many others, the experience is laborious – and scary. Children who struggle with reading often feel about reading as our main character does about watercress – unsure, unfamiliar, and different from their peers. Reading *Watercress* is a demonstration of how challenging reading can be, if students are not equipped with skills to decode the words, understand the vocabulary, negotiate the text and sentence structure, and bring their background knowledge to bear to make meaning from the text. Reading *Watercress* is also a reminder of the importance of including texts that provide windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990) to students to see both themselves and others in the books they read. Our Reading Core courses leverage the power of models of the reading process such as Gough & Tunmer’s Simple View of Reading, Scarborough’s Reading Rope, and professional books such as *The Reading Comprehension Blueprint* by Nancy Hennessey and *The Writing Revolution* by Judith C. Hochman to explicitly prepare our candidates to support their students in developing these skills and experiences through explicit, student-centered instruction.

In 2015, we engaged in two major initiatives focused on ensuring our candidates are prepared to teach reading from this perspective. First, we were among the first programs in the state to become accredited by the International Dyslexia Association across our undergraduate licensure programs and graduate Reading Endorsement program. Second, also in 2015 we developed a Dyslexia Certificate program at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Since this time, these programs prepared over 300 teacher candidates to effectively teach reading to students with dyslexia and related reading differences, on top of their chosen licensure area. In 2023, our Dyslexia Certificate programs earned the distinction of “Accredited Plus” from the International Dyslexia Association. This distinction places us in a select group of institutions of higher education offering this advanced credential to our teacher candidates. At the same time, our undergraduate Reading Core coursework, which prepares an average of over 100 teacher candidates across licensure areas per year, earned a grade of A from the National Council of Teacher Quality, and A+ from the Fordham Institute. These grades were the result of in-depth analysis of OAE data, instructor-designed assessment data, and syllabi analysis.



One way we accomplish all of this is by placing a priority on recruiting and retaining knowledgeable and experienced full-time and part-time faculty to teach in our reading program, and we meet regularly as a team to deliver consistent coursework. Our team of faculty teaching in the Dyslexia Certificate programs is made up of three outstanding adjunct faculty members, Elisabeth Friel-Wahle, Gabrielle Ambrosius, and Monica Haus, who teach in local Catholic schools and bring this practical, relevant experience directly to our students. Along with contributions from Reading Core faculty members Dr. Jackie Arnold, Dr. Treavor Bogard, Dr. Connie Bowman, Dr. Colleen Gallagher, and Dr. Jeremy Mills, this team earned two grants from the Ohio Deans Compact focused on revising and updating our Reading Core coursework to be in alignment with state expectations, leading to those “straight A’s” of which we are so proud.

We are also focused on placing our teacher candidates in classrooms with cooperating educators trained in state approved programs. We received a grant from the Ohio Department of Higher Education to support this work, and we are working with our local Montgomery County Educational Service Center to identify cooperating educators who are appropriately trained, and providing training to those who need it, to help us prepare teachers who can reach and teach every student in their classroom, changing negative experiences with reading, to positive.

Additionally, we are intentional about offering professional development opportunities to in-service teachers focused on effective reading instruction. In our first Ohio Deans Compact grant in 2021, we worked extensively with the Mad River School District to build a shared knowledge base about effective reading instruction through a professional book club, and to identify new contexts in which our preservice teachers can observe and participate in effective reading instruction. Currently, Elisabeth Friel-Wahle and I are working with the Archdiocese of Cincinnati to offer LETRS training to teachers in those schools, as well as to our faculty who need further training. We are working with the Ohio Deans Compact and our partner schools to participate in a community of practice, composed of both university faculty and K-12 teachers, focused on explicit writing instruction based on *The Writing Revolution* text mentioned previously. I work with a dynamic, committed team of faculty at UD who are driven by a common mission to engage in critical, productive discussions with our partner schools and teachers about effective reading instruction and to continuously evaluate and improve our practice.

Further, our Dyslexia Certificate and Reading Endorsement programs both require intensive practicum experiences. Our Dyslexia Certificate candidates work alongside our adjunct faculty in their K-12 classrooms to complete these under close and expert supervision in a real-world setting. They administer assessments, analyze data, and design instruction. They witness first-hand how structured literacy instruction can impact reading achievement.

In *Watercress*, the girl finally sees how her family’s history is also her history, and how, rather than making her strange or different, it is part of her identity. As she and her family enjoy the watercress meal together, the last line of the book reads, “Together, we eat it all, and make a new memory of watercress.” At UD, our faculty work cooperatively to deliver consistent instruction in structured literacy across all of our reading courses. We are focused on helping teachers use quality literature to teach foundational skills, constantly updating our coursework to reflect the most recent evidence regarding how to teach reading, offering meaningful professional development opportunities to teachers, and expanding opportunities for clinical practice for all of our students. In doing this, we not only are meeting state expectations, but we are leveraging the deep expertise of our faculty to deliver high-quality preparation for all of our candidates.



At the University of Dayton, we hold central the idea that our candidates need to be prepared for 30-year careers, in various states and using curricula still not even developed. We are focused on preparing our candidates to walk into classrooms understanding the deep complexities involved in teaching reading, and prepared to respond to the challenges that arise. As teacher educators, K-12 educators, and legislators, there is so much to be gained by coming together to learn from one another to revise and improve our practices. I am appreciative of opportunities like this one to work with all of my colleagues in Ohio to address these pressing issues. We need to be intentional about preparing and empowering reflective, knowledgeable teachers who are equipped to make the best decisions every day for the students sitting in front of them.

Thank you, again, Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee for the opportunity to speak with you today about this important topic.

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