

Written testimony
Youngstown State University
Dr. Charles Howell, Dean
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Good morning, Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, members of the House Higher Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to report on Youngstown State University's progress in implementing the Science of Reading in its educator preparation programs.

In January 2021, with the support of a Literacy Partnership Grant from the P-20 Literacy Collaborative of the Ohio Deans Council, all reading courses in our undergraduate licensure programs were redesigned to incorporate principles of the Science of Reading. In recognition of this progress, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) gave YSU a grade of A for its thorough implementation of an evidence-based approach to the teaching of reading. Appendix C includes syllabi from all of these courses. The 94 teacher candidates who graduated this year have all been trained in the principles and practices of the Science of Reading.

At the graduate level, courses for principal preparation have also been redesigned to ensure future school leaders understand the principles of Science of Reading and the requirements of HB 33. We have begun to align the five required reading courses leading to the Reading Endorsement, but the redesign of these courses is not yet complete.

Significant work remains to be done. Although undergraduate courses now include the Science of Reading, syllabi need to be linked to the new state standards adopted in December 2023. Integration of Science of Reading into graduate courses for the Reading endorsement needs to be completed. To support this work, YSU has applied for and received a grant from ODHE. Besides finishing updates to the curriculum, the grant will support professional development for faculty and provide instructors high quality instructional materials to utilize in courses. The training and materials will allow instructors to model and scaffold evidence-based strategies to teacher candidates, better preparing them for their field placements.

Training of faculty and staff

Reading courses in our programs are taught by two tenure-track faculty member, one of whom oversees the program, one full-time staff member who is responsible for field placements linked to reading courses, and 7 part-time faculty members. In addition to having earned relevant masters and/or doctoral degrees, six of these individuals have completed online training through Lexia LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling). This intensive online interactive program, approved by ODEW, is designed to provide educators the "deep knowledge to be literacy and language experts in the science of reading."¹

Faculty who have not been trained through LETRS will attend the same professional development required for classroom teachers. Three options will be available: 1) Keys to Literacy Course which is customized to meet the minimum 18 hours of professional development, 2) a course provided by ODEW, or 3) an additional course that aligns to the Science of Reading and approved by the literacy coordinator. Faculty will be compensated for their time through the ODHE grant.

This common training, supplemented by the leadership of the literacy coordinator and the use of common syllabi for all sections of reading courses, will help to ensure consistency of instruction for YSU teacher candidates.

Reading-focused field experiences for teacher candidates

YSU works closely with Youngstown City Schools (YCS) to provide opportunities for teacher candidates in elementary, middle, and special education to implement the principles and techniques taught in literacy courses. For each of the four core reading courses, teacher candidates complete 25 hours of field experience in a YCS elementary or middle school, where they tutor at-risk students in reading, based on protocols jointly developed with the school district. This operation, known as Project PASS (Penguin Assistants for Student Success) was initiated by a state grant in 2016. A 2017 study by the state funded Ohio Educational Research Center found that YCS students who received tutoring through Project PASS scored significantly higher than comparable peers on state reading exams.² YCS has adopted the Science of Reading as its literacy framework, so the teaching strategies used in tutoring match what teacher candidates learn in their coursework.

Teacher candidates who do not take the four-course reading core (multiage and adolescent/young adult majors) take one course in Reading in Content Areas and apply SoR principles in field settings arranged by the course instructor. Graduate courses required for the Reading Endorsement require application of concepts in a field setting, usually the teacher's own classroom. More intensive application is provided by two field-based practicum courses taken at or near the end of the program.

Partnerships with local school districts

Coordination with local school districts helps to ensure teacher candidates' experience in the field matches what they have learned in their coursework. It also facilitates graduates' transition to their first teaching position. This continuity is especially important for reading instruction.

Our partnership with YCS has been particularly fruitful for both parties, especially in the area of reading. The Project PASS coordinator consults with the district to align reading tutor placements with the needs of pupils and teachers. She works with district officials to design professional development for reading tutors based on district priorities. She sits on the District Literacy Committee that formulated the YCS Reading Achievement plan, coordinating efforts to address literacy gaps and areas of deficiency. YSU tutors are considered a component of the tiered support in this plan.

Similar coordination occurs in other districts on a smaller scale. In fall 2023, YSU teacher candidates served as reading tutors in Boardman and Austintown Local Schools, Akiva Academy, and Youngstown Community School. The coordinator worked with the Community School to develop its Reading Achievement plan as required by the state. Teachers and administrators from these and other districts regularly teach at YSU after school hours. These schools have embraced the Science of Reading, as have nearly all the districts in which YSU places teacher candidates for field experiences and student teaching.

YSU has been working with all of its partner districts to ensure teachers and administrators understand the Science of Reading. As early as spring 2020, with the assistance of the State Literacy Lead, the university hosted in-depth workshops focused on the Science of Reading. 125 area educators

attended these sessions. In the coming school year, partnership agreements will be amended to require that our teacher candidates work only with mentor teachers with appropriate training in the Science of Reading.

State Support Team 5 and four local Educational Service Centers (Columbiana, Trumbull, Ashtabula, and Eastern Ohio in Mahoning County) have reinforced our connections with partner districts. Staff members of these organizations interact with both the university and the districts, bringing up-to-date knowledge of state policy to both. Staff members of the organizations teach courses at YSU, provide professional development for teacher candidates, serve on the YSU Literacy Leadership Advisory Panel, and have helped update YSU courses. These organizations are an invaluable resource in helping us comply with state legislation, especially over the past two years as the state moved toward adoption of SoR as the state framework for literacy.

Student outcomes

YSU monitors scores on internal and external assessments of the performance of teacher candidates. Data over the past two years, since redesign of undergraduate literacy courses, shows consistently strong performances on the major embedded assessments in all of these courses (Appendix A). It should be noted, however, that these assessments are completed in stages. Teacher candidates have an opportunity to submit revisions of their work based on instructors' feedback and are strongly motivated to do so, since they are not allowed to continue in their program until a satisfactory level of performance has been reached. High mean scores on these assessments do not necessarily indicate a sophisticated level of understanding of all material presented.

The state licensure exam, Ohio Assessment for Educators (OAE), provides a more rigorous assessment. Since January 2023, the initial pass rate for the OAE 190 Reading exam has hovered around 60%, well below the level YSU faculty consider acceptable (Appendix B). In an effort to improve initial pass rates, the teacher preparation unit has provided students with the following resources:

- (a) guidance in sophomore year about the significance of the OAE exams, when to take them, and how to prepare for them;
- (b) archived exam questions embedded in course tests to expose candidates to the reasoning expected on the OAE;
- (c) face-to-face review and preparation sessions conducted by reading faculty;
- (d) commercial test preparation materials targeted to the OAE 190 exam;
- (e) an online site, dubbed "OAE boot camp," with test preparation materials including a study guide, references to key passages in course textbooks, videos of test preparation workshops, and other materials;
- (f) 1 on 1 counseling to help teacher candidates who have failed the test identify and remediate areas of weakness.

These measures have been helpful for students who make use of them. From 2023 to 2024, the pass rate for second and subsequent attempts has risen from 15% to 56%, and the overall pass rate has increased from 65% to 70%. There is more work to be done to ensure all candidates are successful.

At YSU, teacher candidates are not allowed to progress to student teaching until they have passed all required exams for state licensure. Internal and external assessments both during and after

student teaching consistently show that our candidates are well prepared for success in P-12 classrooms.

Conclusion

Educator preparation programs at YSU have made considerable progress in aligning reading instruction to the SoR. Thanks to the Dean’s Compact and ODHE grants, redesigned syllabi, well-trained instructors, robust field placements, and strong partnerships with districts and regional agencies, YSU has made strong progress in incorporating the Science of Reading in the preparation of educators. We anticipate that in the coming academic year, the ODEW audit will find that we have met the requirements of HB33.

Thank you to Chair Young and the House Higher Education Committee for the opportunity to report on our progress. At this time I’m happy to answer any questions.

¹ Lexia Learning, <https://www.lexialearning.com/letrs>.

² <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mieDIOxbWStcSp08kd3rsl8YmitGn8MI/view>.

