

BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.
MARTIN
CENTER
FOR ACADEMIC
RENEWAL

Teacher Preparation

“The most important factor in determining whether readers can understand a text is how much relevant vocabulary or background knowledge they have... That, at least, is what scientists have concluded. Educators and professors of education, on the other hand, have come to exactly the opposite conclusions.” —Natalie Wexler, *The Knowledge Gap: the Hidden Cause of America’s Broken Education System—And How to Fix It*

“We are not convinced that elite education schools are doing an adequate job of conveying fundamental, broad-based content knowledge and skills to prospective teachers. The foundations and methods courses we reviewed suggest that faculty at most of these schools are often trying to teach a particular ideology—that traditional knowledge is repressive by its very nature—without directing their students to any substantial readings that question the educational implications of this view.” —David M. Steiner, with Susan D. Rozen, “Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers: An Analysis of Syllabi from a Sample of America’s Schools of Education,” ch. 5 of *A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom*

Why reform teacher education?

America’s education system is failing its students.¹ According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), an educational assessment administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, literacy levels are declining. The NAEP reading assessment is given to 4th and 8th graders every two years, and the most recent data are discouraging. In 2024, 40 percent of 4th graders and 33 percent of 8th graders

performed below the NAEP’s “basic” level.² These numbers represent declines in scores since 2022. The decline is even steeper compared to 2019. Mathematics scores from 2024 are also disheartening. Both 4th and 8th grade mathematics scores were lower than in 2019.³

Such broadscale learning struggles raise the question of teacher quality. Do teachers bear part of the blame for these bleak numbers? The state of teacher education programs suggests that they do. Many strategies that teachers are

1. To read more from the Martin Center about teacher education reform, visit: <https://jamesmartin.center/tag/teacher-education/>

2. The Nation’s Report Card, “NAEP Report Card: Reading, Explore Results for the 2024 NAEP Reading Assessment.”

3. The Nation’s Report Card, “Mathematics: Mathematics Assessment 2024.”

taught to employ in the classroom, such as centering education around students' interests instead of prescribed content knowledge, have "been long discredited."⁴

Too much emphasis is placed on pedagogy rather than the specific subject matter teachers need to know to teach their fields competently. Teachers cannot impart what they do not have. This lack of content knowledge produces severe consequences for literacy because students' ability to understand a text is directly related to the relevant background knowledge they have in long-term memory.⁵ Additionally, schools of education have fallen prey to the diversity, equity, and inclusion agenda which deemphasizes student achievement.

By failing to properly train teachers, schools of education are failing the country's youngest students. This cycle of impoverished education can stop if educators—held accountable by policymakers—depoliticize their classrooms and integrate the latest evidence-based research on effective learning.

Recommendations

The Martin Center recommends that legislatures, university boards, and faculty governing committees take steps to reform teacher education.

4. Natalie Wexler, *The Knowledge Gap* (New York: Avery, 2019), p. 49.

5. Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom*, 1st edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), p. 33.

Universities and University Systems should:

- Require teacher candidates to take courses that equip them with the core content knowledge of their area of specialization.
- Consult and incorporate into curricula the latest research on the science of reading.
- Prohibit diversity, equity, and inclusion-focused curricular requirements.
- Require teacher candidates to take ten credit hours in elementary mathematics and "ensure the required coursework provides the necessary instructional time to address the essential knowledge elementary teachers need."⁶
- Ensure mathematics courses include the following content areas: Numbers and Operations; Algebraic Thinking; Geometry and Measurement; and Data Analysis and Probability.⁷

Policymakers should:

- Require institutions to teach fundamental content knowledge of American civics, culture, and history.
- Evaluate programs and course syllabi regularly to ensure their alignment with content knowledge standards.
- "Require a content licensure test measuring all four core content areas separately."⁸
- Examine state licensure tests to ensure that teaching standards align with the science of reading.
- Adopt alternate routes to licensure or certification, such as those offered by the American Board, that emphasize mastery of relevant content knowledge.

6. National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), "Teacher Prep Review Standard: Elementary Mathematics."

7. NCTQ, "Elementary Mathematics."

8. NCTQ, "Teacher Prep Review Standard: Building Content Knowledge."

- Eliminate DEI-focused curriculum requirements in teacher education programs.
- “Make current standards for elementary mathematics preparation more explicit and assess programs on their alignment to the standards during the program approval process.”⁹
- “Hold programs accountable for fully preparing any candidate they have admitted by scrutinizing program pass rates on state licensing tests, particularly the first-time pass rates.”¹⁰

Model policies:

- [Model Education Licensure Code](#), National Association of Scholars
- [Heritage Certificates Act](#), National Association of Scholars
- [Alternative Certification Act](#), American Legislative Exchange Council
- [Model language on content knowledge](#), the Knowledge Matters Campaign Scientific Advisory Committee

Further Reading:

From the Martin Center:

- “[Florida Fights Education-School Radicalization](#)” by Scott Yenor and Steven DeRose (July 12, 2024).
- [A Less Cloistered Schoolhouse](#) by Frederick M. Hess (July 27, 2023).
- “[America Needs Better Teachers](#)” by Sandra Stotsky (August 31, 2022).

9. NCTQ, “[Elementary Mathematics](#).”
 10. NCTQ, “[Elementary Mathematics](#).”

- “[UNC Schools Indoctrinate Future Teachers](#)” by Jenna A. Robinson (January 24, 2022).
- “[Reforming Dysfunctional Teacher Education: ‘Back to the Future?’](#)” by Lucien Ellington (April 14, 2021).
- “[For Teacher Training, Drop Critical Theory and Add Character](#)” by Matthew Post (November 18, 2020).
- “[Battling the Red Guards of Red Pedagogy](#)” by Shannon Watkins (December 9, 2019).
- “[Educate the Educators!](#)” by Shannon Watkins (July 15, 2019).
- [The Politicization of University Schools of Education: The Long March through the Education Schools](#) by Jay Schalin (February 2019).
- “[Teacher Training and the Construction of Illiteracy](#)” by Terry Stoops (June 15, 2018).
- “[Is the UNC System Serious about Teacher Training Reform?](#)” by Terry Stoops (March 12, 2018).
- “[Free Teacher Ed!](#)” by Jay Schalin (January 20, 2013).
- “[No Wonder Johnny \(Still\) Can’t Read](#)” by Larry Sand (January 4, 2012).

Other sources:

- [The Predictable, But Unpredictably Personal, Politics of Teacher Licensure](#) by Frederick M. Hess, American Enterprise Institute.
- “[Getting Reading Right](#)” by Robert Pondiscio, American Enterprise Institute.
- “[Building Content Knowledge](#),” National Council on Teacher Quality.
- “[Elementary Mathematics](#),” National Council on Teacher Quality.

- *A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom?: Appraising Old Answers and New Ideas* edited by Frederick M. Hess, Andrew J. Rotherham, and Katie Walsh.
- *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* by E.D. Hirsch.
- *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* by Daniel T. Willingham.
- “Teaching Content Is Teaching Reading” by Daniel Willingham (YouTube video).
- The American Board.
- “Reading Foundations,” National Council on Teacher Quality.

For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or info@jamesgmartin.center.

To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of civics education, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/tag/teacher-education>

About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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