Separate Reading Exams Await Elementary Teachers

By Stephen Sawchuk

A handful of states are gradually adopting licensing tests that measure aspiring elementary teachers' ability to master aspects of what's arguably their most important task: teaching students to read.

In the most recent example of what appears to be a slow but steady push, Wisconsin became the latest state to adopt a rigorous, stand-alone test of elementary teachers' knowledge of the science of reading. Though such efforts to improve the quality of reading instruction generally have been pushed by a fairly small network of constituents, those proponents say that updating licensing exams is one of the few ways states can ensure that reading-instruction skills are taught in teacher training.

"I think it's definitely increased attention to the need to cover this content in a more consistent way," said Louise Spear-Swerling, a professor in the department of special education and reading at Southern Connecticut State University, in New Haven. The state adopted neighboring Massachusetts' reading test in 2009.

"It's only one piece of what we need to do to prepare teachers well," Ms. Spear-Swerling said. "It's not a cure-all. It does not measure how well a teacher translates content into practice. But it's an important piece, because it's foundational knowledge teachers need to have."

Impact on Preparation

Historically, elementary-licensure tests have measured content knowledge across a variety of subjects. Many such exams have not been long or detailed enough to report a separate score for each content area.

In effect, critics say, that has meant a candidate could do poorly in the crucial area of teaching reading but answer enough questions correctly overall to earn a license. That started to change in the late 1990s, when California became the first state whose legislature required elementary teachers to pass a separate test in reading instruction. Massachusetts began to administer such a test for all elementary teachers in 2003, and other states have since followed suit.

The recently adopted Wisconsin test originated in Massachusetts. Its content was largely shaped by Sandra Stotsky, a former official in the state education department and later a member of the state board of education. The exam emphasizes teacher knowledge of the five crucial aspects of reading instruction outlined in the 2000 National Reading Panel report. Those components include phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.

Ms. Stotsky, a professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas, in Fayetteville, has since served as an unpaid consultant to groups interested in adopting the exam in their states, including Connecticut and Wisconsin.
In Wisconsin, the test was **recommended by a task force** headed by Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican, and state schools Superintendent Tony Evers, a Democrat. It was included in a recently passed education law that features a reading agenda as well as changes to teacher-evaluation policies.

The idea had been in the air for some time. Concerned with stagnant reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Wisconsin chapter of the International Dyslexia Association and the Wisconsin Reading Coalition had spent much time trying to drum up interest among state constituents without much success, said Pam Heyde, a private reading tutor who worked with the groups.

"We heard numerous things, all amounting to variations on avoiding the problem, so we decided we had to go around all these roadblocks" through legislation, she said.

A proposal was introduced as early as 2009, but it was only after the Statehouse tilted to Republicans that it garnered enough support to pass, including the votes of some Democratic lawmakers.

Experts in states that have already adopted similar exams say they have helped address one long-standing problem: inconsistent reading instruction across education schools.

"It's really important that you have systemic coverage of the content, and that's one of the things the test is helping to promote," said Southern Connecticut State's Ms. Spear-Swerling, who sat on the state panel that recommended the test in that state. "It's directing people's attention to resources that have been out there for a long time."

It's not yet clear how the policy will play out in Wisconsin.

The associate dean of teacher preparation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Cheryl R. Hanley-Maxwell, said that on first blush, it appears her faculty members already cover the topics emphasized on the test.

"We have always taught the 'big five' in reading," she said. "It's kind of one of those questions about where you put your emphasis, and I think we'll make some subtle changes to that."

Jennifer Mueller, an associate professor of early-childhood education and teacher education at UW-Milwaukee, added that faculty members in her division would spend time this summer making sure that the topics are included on teachers' syllabuses and are taught using a standard vocabulary.

**Policy Pitfalls**

For a policy change that seems relatively simple on paper, getting separate reading-skills exams has often been fraught with political challenges.

Particularly because of its emphasis on teachers' ability to focus on the five National Reading Panel components, the Massachusetts exam comes perilously close to the "reading wars" over explicit-skills instruction in word-level alphabetics versus context-based constructivist approaches to teaching reading.

"I would say it's focused on one particular way of teaching reading," said Ms. Hanley-Maxwell of UW-Madison. "We have always put an emphasis on balanced literacy, and we'll continue to teach our students to teach reading in a much broader way."

Schools of education are also wary of plans to publish passing rates on the test by institution,
according to Sarah Archibald, an education policy adviser to Wisconsin Sen. Luther Olsen, the Republican who chairs the chamber's education committee. (Institutional reporting is also used in both Massachusetts and Connecticut.)

The tests' proponents note there are still challenges in making sure they actually set a higher standard.

For one, states still decide where to set the passing score on the test. A recent *Education Week* analysis of federally required data found that states often set those scores at levels that fall far below the average score of test-takers. ("Analysis Raises Questions About Rigor of Teacher Tests," January 31, 2012.)

The Wisconsin law stipulates that the state cannot set the cutoff score "lower than the level recommended by the developer of the test based on this state's standards," a phrase that hints at a relatively high passing score.

**Next, Math Content?**

Only about a dozen states in all require elementary teacher-candidates to take a separate test, or have a separately scored subtest, that measures candidates' knowledge of the science of reading. But some testing experts believe interest in licensing tests will grow as part of the nation's discussion about how to improve the effectiveness of the teaching force.

"They're seeing their human capital all starts in teacher preparation. And in those programs, factors such as who enters the programs, and what they're expected to learn, have tremendous effect on who learns that in the classroom," said Bill P. Gorth, the president of the Amherst, Mass.-based Evaluation Services group of Pearson, which developed the Massachusetts exam. "Reading happens to be a very, very high priority."

Minnesota also recently adopted a separate subtest in reading, though it is not as detailed as the Massachusetts exam. Indiana is moving to separately scored subtests for elementary teachers, one of which will be on reading instruction. And New Mexico passed a law in 2011 also requiring a separate test of reading instruction for elementary educators by next Jan. 1.

In the meantime, testing experts say they've seen interest among states in more-detailed information on elementary teachers' knowledge of other content areas, particularly mathematics.

In response to states' demands, the Educational Testing Service has devised a new, longer elementary-licensure exam with separate subscores for each of the four content areas tested—reading/language arts, social studies, math, and science, according to Peter V. Yeager, the national director of client relations for the Princeton, N.J.-based test-maker.

The test, at 3½ hours, is 75 percent longer than the ETS' more commonly administered elementary-content test. New Hampshire and Utah have adopted the longer test, and ETS officials say other states will likely come on board.

"There are a large number considering the multisubject exam either for the upcoming testing year or perhaps the year after that," Mr. Yeager said. "My guess is this could become one of the de facto elementary education tests."
Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at [www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education](http://www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education).

Vol. 31, Issue 28, Pages 1,13