

Testimony for a Hearing in Arkansas for HB 1590

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I thank State Representative Ann Clemmer, Vice-Chair of the House Education Committee, for the invitation to comment on the merit of HB 1590, a bill requiring more demanding licensure tests for prospective elementary and special education teachers in Arkansas to ensure they are prepared to teach to the state's new reading and mathematics standards.

Professional Background: I received doctoral training in reading research and reading instruction at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. From 1999-2003, I was senior associate commissioner at the Massachusetts Department of Education where, among other duties, I was in charge of revising the state's educator licensure regulations and licensure tests. As part of my responsibilities, I helped to develop the Foundations of Reading test (90), for which I received no remuneration from the testing company then or since then. I have at no charge advised legislators, state board members, and department of education staff in many states (e.g., Wisconsin, California, Indiana, Minnesota, and Connecticut) on how to strengthen licensure regulations and tests for prospective elementary and special education teachers.

Among my efforts to improve literacy teaching in Arkansas while at the University of Arkansas, I served on the state-wide committee that helped to develop the Arkansas Comprehensive State Literacy Plan for Birth to 12th Grade (2011). The attachment to this testimony, labeled Appendix A, shows my contribution to the section on teacher preparation. My published research reports and papers on licensure tests for prospective elementary teachers are listed in a bibliography at the end of this written testimony.

I will speak to the following points:

- 1. Why the reading test specified in HB 1590 adequately fills Arkansas' need for a strong, comprehensive, stand-alone licensure test of reading instructional knowledge for prospective elementary teachers.**
- 2. Why the curriculum test specified in HB 1590 fills Arkansas' need for a strong licensure test of other major subjects in the elementary school curriculum, especially mathematics.**
- 3. How the tests specified in HB 1590 compare with other licensure tests of reading and elementary mathematics.**
- 4. What criteria should be used in selecting licensure tests for prospective K-6 teachers in Arkansas.**

requirements for grades 7 and 8. Arkansas now needs a comprehensive, evidence-based, stand-alone licensure test of reading instructional knowledge for all prospective teachers of elementary-age children to ensure that new classroom teachers are more effective teachers of reading, for dyslexic children as well as the others.

The test specified in HB 1590—the Massachusetts Foundations of Reading Test (90)—more than adequately serves that purpose. Developed by reading researchers, reading specialists, and reading faculty in Massachusetts in 2001 and later adopted by Connecticut (2009), Wisconsin (2012), North Carolina (2012), and New Hampshire (2013), the test contains 100 multiple-choice test items, plus two Open Response essay questions requiring analysis of children’s reading errors. A 100-item practice test is available at http://www.mtel.nesinc.com/PDFs/MA_FLD090_PRACTICE_TEST.pdf and shows clearly the kinds of test items on the test.

Why did North Carolina’s Board of Education adopt the test at the recommendation of its Department of Public Instruction? According to a North Carolina newspaper, the top officials at its Department of Public Instruction were told by Massachusetts Department of Education officials in 2011 that the Bay State “owed its success to this test” for the increase in student scores that has put the state in first place in grades 4 and 8 on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading tests since 2005.

Arkansas should have the same academic expectations for aspiring elementary and special education teachers as North Carolina, Wisconsin, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. That is why HB 1590 states that the raw score for passing the test should be close to the one worked out in other states using this test. Based on my many visits to elementary classrooms in Northwest Arkansas, I am confident that prospective elementary teachers in this state can pass at the same rates as they do in Connecticut and Massachusetts if they are given appropriate reading methods coursework.

Arkansas’ Department of Education recognizes that the current PRAXIS tests for P-4 do not adequately assess the knowledge elementary teachers should bring to their **first** classroom experiences teaching reading or mathematics. Prospective elementary and special education teachers in Arkansas should be expected to pass a comprehensive test on which over one half of the test items assess phonological and phonemic awareness, understanding of the alphabetic principle and concepts of print, the role of phonics, word analysis strategies, and vocabulary development. A useful test should also have Open Response questions requiring test-takers to show in writing their skill in diagnosing student reading errors. That is why the Foundations of Reading (90) has been adopted by other states.

2. Why the curriculum test specified in HB 1590 fills Arkansas’s need for a strong licensure test of other major subjects in the elementary school curriculum, especially mathematics.

I also support adoption of the curriculum test for elementary and special education teachers specified in HB 1590. North Carolina is also adopting this test from the Bay State’s battery of licensure tests. This test—the General Curriculum test (03)—contains two stand-alone sections: 40 items on mathematics, and 55 items on science, children’s and adult literature, and history and geography. The development of the separately scorable mathematics test was approved in 2006 by the state board of education because it

geography. He gave a similar assurance to the North Carolina Board of Education in December 2012; state items in history and geography on the general curriculum test would be about North Carolina.

(3) Comparison with other stand-alone licensure tests assessing reading instructional knowledge and elementary mathematics knowledge.

Two years ago, Educational Testing Service created a new PRAXIS II test: Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5031). This test contains four separately-scorable sections, one of which is on Reading and Language. This section contains 60 test items, 32 of which assess reading instructional knowledge. This is far from being sufficient even if all 32 test items focus on research-based reading instructional knowledge. Unfortunately, it is not clear from the PRAXIS website that all 32 do, and 32 test items do not constitute an adequate assessment of reading instructional knowledge.

ETS provides another stand-alone PRAXIS II reading test—Teaching Reading (5204)—that may be close in content to the Massachusetts Foundations of Reading Test (90). This new PRAXIS test consists of 90 multiple-choice items and 3 Open Response essay questions. It is described as reflecting the five essential components of effective reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel. It is also described as designed for “adding a reading endorsement to an existing license.” This sounds like a good possibility to require for license renewal for practicing teachers in the elementary grades in Arkansas.

ETS is just completing a new stand-alone PRAXIS II reading test—Teaching Reading: Elementary Education (5203) that is not yet available on its website. A brief advanced copy was made available for this hearing. This test also has 90 multiple-choice items and 3 Open (Constructed) Response questions. Unfortunately, it does not make a clear distinction between imaginative/literary texts and informational/expository texts and the different elements in and skills needed for each major type of text. This is the key challenge teachers of reading need to address in states that have adopted Common Core’s standards, and the muddle in the reading comprehension section (E) of this test reflects the muddle in current reading methods coursework and in the work of reading researchers themselves. The Foundations of Reading test (90) makes a very clear distinction between the two major types of text.

The 40-item Massachusetts test of elementary mathematics knowledge in its General Curriculum test (03) and the 40-item PRAXIS test of elementary mathematics knowledge in its Multiple Subjects test (5031) are the only two stand-alone elementary mathematics tests available. But we do not know how strong the PRAXIS test is, nor do we know how strong the other sections of this Multiple Subjects test are. The ETS website provides no information on how strong they are or **who** developed the guidelines for test items on mathematics, science, and history/geography.

On the other hand, the mathematicians and others who developed the Massachusetts test are identified in Guidelines for the Mathematical Preparation of Elementary Teachers. These July 2007 Guidelines (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtel/mathguidance.pdf>) also indicate what topics should be taught in mathematics coursework for prospective elementary teachers. Concerns about the test’s effect on diversity were effectively addressed by an African-American member of the board of education. He said that academic quality came first, then concerns about diversity. He voted for a high cut score

2. At least 50% of the items to assess research-based beginning reading skills.
3. At least one Open Response question so that test-takers can indicate how well they can write up their diagnosis of student reading errors.
4. A clear distinction between characteristic reading elements in and skills needed for imaginative/literary texts and characteristic reading elements in and skills needed for informational/expository texts,

Criteria for a stand-alone elementary mathematics test should include:

1. Indication of main authorship (e.g., what mathematicians have reviewed and approved test items).
2. Guidelines for the mathematics coursework (not mathematics methods coursework) tailored to prospective elementary and special education teachers as part of their teacher preparation programs.

On a final note, I would like to make several suggestions:

1. Whatever tests Arkansas adopts should have been used for at least three to five years so that their effects on elementary classroom teachers and their students can be gauged. The attachment to this testimony, labeled Appendix B, shows where grade 4 Arkansas students are on the grade 4 NAEP reading test in 2011. Arkansas students can do much better than that if their teachers are given stronger reading coursework in their preparation programs.

I know that the Arkansas Department of Education is eager to recommend a much stronger reading test for the new K-6 license than was used for the P-4 license. A licensure test of reading instructional knowledge for prospective elementary and special education teachers should ensure that, at the least, they are prepared to teach to Common Core's distinction between informational and literary texts and understand all the ways in which these two types of texts differ—for the development of writing as well as reading skills.

2. I also suggest that Arkansas (or school districts) offer an incentive for classroom teachers of elementary-age children to take and pass a strong stand-alone reading test when applying for renewal of their license if they have not passed a strong stand-alone test to get their first license.
3. Finally, I suggest that the legislature request a report from the Arkansas Department of Education when it has selected tests for the new K-6 license indicating how the selected tests compare with similar tests they did not select.

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