Invited Testimony for a Hearing on Wisconsin Bill AB 558

Sandra Stotsky
Professor of Education Reform
Twenty First Century Chair in Teacher Quality
University of Arkansas
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I thank Senator Luther Olsen, Chair of the Senate Education Committee, and Representative Steven Kestell, Chair of the Assembly Education Committee, for the opportunity to comment on AB 558, an omnibus education bill that includes improving early literacy and educator effectiveness. My comments address how to strengthen the language in the bill on licensure requirements for teachers of reading for elementary-age children in order to strengthen their coursework and student teaching in professional preparation programs and to ensure that new teachers of elementary-age children are prepared to be more effective than they now are in teaching and assessing reading in their first classroom assignment.

Professional Background: I received my 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 developing licensure tests for prospective teachers of reading, whether as elementary teachers, early childhood teachers, special education teachers, or reading specialists.

While at the Massachusetts Department of Education, I worked regularly with staff at National Evaluation Systems (now under Pearson) in revising objectives, weights, test items, cut scores, and reporting policies for the state's subject licensure tests. Among the tests I helped to develop was the Foundations of Reading test, a stand-alone test of 100 test items and two short essay questions, as well as a Reading Specialist test. I also developed criteria for the state's applications for Reading First professional development programs, as well as its own application to the USDE for a Reading First grant. I have advised legislators, state board members, and department of education staff in many states (e.g., Virginia, California, Indiana, Minnesota, and Connecticut) on how to strengthen their licensing regulations and licensure tests for those who teach reading.

Professional Publications: I have given or published research reports and other writing on licensure tests for prospective elementary teachers who teach reading or mathematics. These peer-reviewed reports or invited essays are listed at the end of this written testimony.

I will speak to the following points:
1. Why and how a stand-alone licensure test of reading instructional knowledge was developed in Massachusetts.

2. Comparison to other licensure tests of reading instructional knowledge.

3. What language should be added to the bill to ensure that the strongest possible reading test is adopted.

4. How to report test administration results.

Point 1. Why and how a stand-alone licensure test of reading instructional knowledge for prospective teachers of elementary-age students was developed in Massachusetts: This test was developed after a series of meetings I had held with teacher education faculty throughout the state in 1999. At these meetings, there was general agreement that the state's licensure test for teachers of elementary-age children did not assess beginning reading instructional knowledge adequately (the one subject test in use assessed knowledge of all subjects that might be taught in a self-contained elementary classroom, including music, art, and physical education; the subject tests for early childhood and special education teachers assessed little reading instructional knowledge, if any). Teacher education faculty at these meetings also acknowledged that many children in Massachusetts were not learning how to read or read well. They expressed support for a stand-alone licensure test of reading for all prospective elementary and early childhood teachers (and later, special education teachers), in addition to a subject test of other areas of the elementary curriculum.

The first step was to change licensure regulations to indicate that passing a stand-alone test of reading would be required for licensure of prospective elementary, early childhood, and (later) special education teachers and that passing a different stand-alone test of reading would be required of those seeking a license as reading specialists. The revised licensure regulations were sent out for public comment and then approved by the Board of Education. The regulations also spelled out exactly what topics were required for study in preparation programs for licensure of these prospective teachers, to serve as the legal basis for the tests and to respond to a request from education school faculty for some specifics. (See Appendix A.)

The test for prospective teachers of reading for elementary-age children was developed in stages. I developed the first outline of strands, sub-strands, and weights in consultation with NES staff. I then asked two well-known, respected professors of reading, one in each major "camp," to collaborate in revising my outline. Each knew well the research on reading. I promised that the outline they revised and sent back to me would go to a group of about 20 reading professors, specialists, and researchers in the state for consensus on further revision if deemed necessary. Their revised outline (which contained a few changes) went as promised to the larger committee for consensus on further revision; only a few changes were made at this point--the major one was moving the vocabulary sub-strand from the skills section to the reading comprehension section. (Everyone in the field by this time understood the process I was using and who was involved.) The final revision then went out to the entire field for comment. I read everything. The final version was used for the development and review of test items by another large committee of reading professors, specialists, and researchers.
The test was completed and went online in 2002, less than a year after the National Reading Panel's report came out. That is why some terminology in the test is not identical to terminology in the Panel's report. ("Fluency" is implied by "automatic" or "rapid" word recognition but not used directly.) At this point, I want to make it clear that I have never received any remuneration from NES for my own work on any of the tests I revised or developed, at that time or since then. I saw it as part of my responsibilities to ensure that anything my name was on as senior associate commissioner met my academic and professional standards. I had to sign off on everything at every stage of development.

The process used for developing a stand-alone test for prospective reading specialists was similar except that the basis for a new committee of 20's work was the test developed for prospective teachers of reading of elementary-age children. The major issue this new committee wrestled with and worked out was the nature of the work to be done by someone called a reading specialist. This was an important professional issue because it would affect the weights on the test. Was the license to be chiefly for a semi-administrator position (e.g., a director of reading) or for a clinician (e.g., a diagnostician plus) who would be qualified to do one-on-one work with children?

After much discussion (and argument), the committee reached consensus that what was needed was a license for a clinician, not for a semi-administrative position. Therefore the committee worked out weights for strands as well as the sub-strands and specific objectives. The distinction between these two stand-alone tests (and between the preparation programs leading to licensure as a teacher of reading or as a reading specialist) remains important even if the distinction is not observed in many state frameworks for teacher and specialist licensure or in the tests they take. The final sections of the reading specialist test did address issues that might be handled in a school by a reading director, to encourage schools to hire for this position (encouraged by Reading First requirements) someone who knew reading research and reading instructional issues.

Point 2. Comparisons to other licensure tests of reading instructional knowledge: I had gathered my own information on what was on other licensure tests of reading instructional knowledge before Massachusetts developed its own stand-alone test. I have also, in the past decade, systematically examined sample test items and descriptions of the tests used by other states in their attempts to ensure that new teachers of reading for elementary-age children were adequately assessed on their reading instructional knowledge. Two studies (items 3 and 7) in the bibliography contain tables showing the results of my research.

As noted in my 2009 study in the Journal of Learning Disabilities, less than a handful of states just a few years ago required stand-alone licensure tests adequately assessing the elements that made the Massachusetts test the strongest one in the country—a claim based indirectly on student scores on NAEP's reading tests. These states included Connecticut, whose board of education at the recommendation of its commissioner of education had adopted Massachusetts' test in 2009 without any change in content and with just a slight change in cut score.

Point 3. What language should be added to the bill to ensure that the strongest possible licensure test of reading instructional knowledge is developed or adopted: I have several suggestions to offer:
* The requirement that prospective teachers of elementary-age children pass a licensure examination of reading instructional knowledge should explicitly include early childhood teachers licensed to teach grades K, 1, 2, and 3, elementary teachers licensed up to grade 6, and special education teachers.

* Approximate weights for the major strands in this test (and the pass score) should be spelled out in the bill to ensure that all test-takers must earn points in all sections in order to pass a test that uses compensatory scoring to arrive at the total score (total number right across all sections). I recommend:
  -- 35% for a strand on phonological and phonemic awareness, understanding of the alphabetic principle and concepts of print, the role of phonics, and word analysis skills and strategies;
  -- 27% for a strand on the development of vocabulary/concepts as well as comprehension strategies for imaginative and informational texts (vocabulary study needs to be integrated with reading comprehension because it is the major component in it);
  -- 18% for a strand on reading assessment and instruction;
  -- 20% for Open Response questions requiring the integration of knowledge.

* There should be about 100 multiple-choice items on the test to allow for piloting some items for future tests (that don't count for test-takers' scores).

* The raw score for passing the test should be identical to the one used in Massachusetts. I was told by Connecticut's commissioner of education that a similar cut score was used when Connecticut adopted the Massachusetts reading test— for reciprocity and comparison. Appendix B shows the results of this test by Connecticut training programs on the July 2010 test administration. Appendix C shows the results in recent test administrations in Massachusetts. The average percentage of first-time test-takers passing in both states is in the same ball park.

* Any existing test of reading fundamentals, if it is to be adopted, must show at least five years of regular use.

* A separate licensure test should be developed for reading specialists if they serve primarily as clinicians, not in semi-administrative positions, e.g., as directors of reading.

* Approximate weights for the major strands in a test for reading specialists should be spelled out in the bill to ensure that all test-takers must earn points in all sections in order to pass a test that uses compensatory scoring to arrive at the total score (total number right across all sections). I recommend:
  -- 32% for all the objectives in the first two strands in the other reading test;
  -- 16% for principles of test construction and interpretation of test results, understanding of formal and informal reading and writing assessments, understanding of assessment in promoting reading and writing development, and understanding of screening and diagnosis of reading difficulties;
  -- 16% for understanding research-based instructional strategies, programs, and methodologies for promoting early reading and writing development and for consolidating and extending reading and writing skills, understanding of differentiated reading instruction, and understanding of reading resources;
  -- 16% for understanding the research and the roles of the reading specialist;
  -- 20% for Open Response questions requiring the integration of knowledge.
*There should be about 100 multiple-choice items on the test to allow for piloting some items for future tests (that don't count for test-takers' scores).

*Wisconsin (or school districts) should offer an incentive for teachers of reading for elementary-age children or reading specialists to take and pass a different reading test when applying for renewal of their license (if they have not passed a reading licensure test to get their first license).

**Point 4. How to report test administration results:** The tables in Appendix B and Appendix C suggest two different ways in which results can be reported to the public. Test administration results by institution or by the number and percentage of first-time test-takers and the number and percentage of test-retakers. I would also suggest a third way to report results incorporating the kind of information in these two tables but breaking the results down (or putting them in separate tables) by licensure type. In other words, it would be useful for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to know how the different groups of teachers required to take the reading test fare by licensure field as well as by institution.

**Bibliography**


2. "Teacher licensing standards, teacher quality, and student achievement in urban schools." Invited written statement submitted to the New Jersey State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and entered into the Committee’s written record on May 8, 2009.

3. Licensure tests for special education teachers: How well they assess knowledge of reading instruction and mathematics. (2009). *Journal of Learning Disabilities.* September/October, 42 (5), 464-474. [http://ldx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/42/5/464](http://ldx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/42/5/464) or, for full version, see [http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/People/Stotsky/LicensureTestsForSpecialEducationTeachers.pdf](http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/People/Stotsky/LicensureTestsForSpecialEducationTeachers.pdf)


