

State council proposes new literacy requirements for teacher training and licensing

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Oregon teacher colleges and future and current teachers hoping to get hired at public elementary schools in the state could soon be required to demonstrate a much more robust understanding of how to teach reading and writing than is currently required.

Gov. Tina Kotek's Early Literacy Educator Preparation Council – made up of K-12 and staff from Oregon teacher colleges, as well as literacy experts, an indigenous language expert and bipartisan state legislators – shared its final recommendations last week for overhauling literacy training for elementary teachers in the state.

Nationwide, the reading ability of kids in the U.S. has not improved in decades, due in part to the teaching of flawed reading methods. About 40% of Oregon fourth graders and one-third of Oregon eighth graders scored "below basic" on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress, often referred to as the "nation's report card." That means they struggle to read and understand simple words.

The council recommends that officials at the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission – which licenses teachers in Oregon – adopt a much more comprehensive set of literacy standards than currently exists. The council also recommended the agency ensure the new standards are met in the process of approving literacy curriculum at Oregon’s 15 teacher colleges, which happens every seven years, and in the process of licensing new teachers or doing license renewals. If adopted, the changes could go into effect by the fall of 2026.

Kotek called the recommendations “a significant step forward” in a news release. She is reviewing the standards, and to be adopted, they need approval by the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission.

Raising the bar

The new standards would require that college educator preparation programs ensure their curriculum and instruction are based on the large body of cognitive and neuroscience research on how the brain learns to read and how childrens’ brains make connections among sounds, language symbols and content, often called the “science of reading.” Colleges would need to help future elementary school teachers develop a mastery of written and oral language rules, foundational reading skills such as phonics and word decoding and teach them reading instructional skills that align with standards for teaching kids with Dyslexia.

Up to 60% of kids struggle with some of the same reading challenges that kids with dyslexia struggle with, such as learning to decode written words by mapping sounds to letters and letter combinations, or phonics. Many kids benefit from instruction in the earliest grades that is similar to the more direct and systematic phonics instruction that kids with dyslexia often need.

In 2017, the state Legislature passed Senate Bill 1003 to ensure teacher colleges and Oregon schools teach educators about dyslexia and methods for teaching kids according to international dyslexia standards of instruction. According to Anca Matica, a Kotek spokesperson, that bill was mostly designed to teach school staff to screen for dyslexia. The council’s recommendations carry that forward by calling for incorporating dyslexia instructional reading standards into general literacy standards, she said.

Ronda Fritz, co-chair of the council and an associate professor at Eastern Oregon University’s teacher colleges, said in a news release that the new standards, if adopted, will improve student outcomes and produce better teachers.

“I believe these standards will give educator preparation programs a clear roadmap for designing courses and programs that will produce teachers with the essential knowledge and skills to create proficient readers and writers,” she said.

A reading movement

Most Oregon teacher preparation programs have received failing grades for reading instruction from the Washington, D.C.-based National Council on Teacher Quality, which has convened panels of experts to review programs since 2013. Until September of 2021, the exam to get certified as a reading specialist in Oregon included testing teachers on a skill broadly criticized today: “Cueing” involves getting students to

guess at words and use pictures. By including it in the exam, it essentially ensured Oregon teachers were taught the flawed method.

To correct these longstanding instructional gaps, Kotek established the Early Literacy Educator Preparation Council via executive order in May 2023 as part of a larger Early Literacy Success Initiative, involving a \$120 million investment to improve reading instruction among Oregon teachers and reading ability among Oregon students. In May, as part of the initiative, state education officials distributed \$90 million in grants to more than 250 schools to hire more teachers, literacy experts and coaches and pay for new curriculum aligned with the science of reading.

The educator preparation council is focused on improving how teachers are trained. The recommendations would apply to people teaching kindergarten through fifth grade and to those pursuing a degree in elementary education and special education. They also would apply to teachers who earn state endorsements as a reading interventionist, to teach English to speakers of other languages and to anyone seeking an administrative license.

To help colleges make major changes in how reading instruction is taught, Kotek's council recommended the state offer grants to help defer new or increased costs, and provide state literacy experts to go to Oregon colleges to assess and aid in updating curriculum and class instruction.

"Some or all Oregon educator preparation programs are likely to undergo significant change in order to meet the new standards," the council members wrote in the report to Kotek.

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