

*Prepared
to Make a
Difference*



An Executive Summary
of the National
Commission on
Excellence in
Elementary Teacher
Preparation for
Reading Instruction

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN ELEMENTARY TEACHER PREPARATION FOR READING INSTRUCTION

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*The International
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PREPARED TO
MAKE A DIFFERENCE

*“Our obligation to
America’s teachers is
as clear and strong
as our obligation
to America’s children.
Teachers deserve all the
knowledge and support
we can give them.
And children deserve
the quality education
that comes from
excellent teachers.
This is their birthright.”*

—First Lady Laura Bush



There is a growing consensus in the United States today that putting a quality teacher in every classroom is the key to addressing the challenges of literacy learning in schools. Every major review of the research literature on effective teaching of reading has reached the same conclusion. Effective teaching makes a difference in student learning. Teachers—not the instructional method or the materials—are crucial to promoting student learning. The qualities of effective teachers are well documented in the research literature. Researchers agree that effective teachers of reading are knowledgeable, strategic, adaptive, responsive, and reflective.

Importantly, the consensus about the need for quality teachers in classrooms reaches beyond the research community and into the policy arena. The federal No Child Left Behind law of 2002 mandates no less than a “qualified teacher” in every public school classroom. Policy concerns center on low-performing schools that serve minority and economically disadvantaged students—schools that are struggling to improve despite significant investments. Many children in these schools lack basic reading, language, and English literacy skills. But the fundamental issues facing educators and policy makers are more complicated. Schools with the most challenging students have the most difficult time attracting and retaining qualified teachers. Yet schools are expected to teach all children to learn at much higher levels than ever before. And the bar keeps rising. Today’s fast-paced, competitive world demands that students acquire increasingly high levels of literacy to function successfully. Without a major investment in quality teaching, the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” may continue to widen—a disturbing trend for a nation founded on the principle of opportunity for all.

The colleges and universities that prepare teachers in the United States have a pivotal role to play in meeting the challenge of placing a quality teacher of reading in every classroom. The vast majority of elementary teachers enter the profession through an undergraduate preparation program in higher education. What do we know about these programs? What do we know about the quality of the preparation they provide? What do we know about the success of teachers as they move from undergraduate programs into full-time teaching responsibilities? Does the quality of preparation in these programs make a difference in the quality of teaching and student achievement?

While many research reviews, including those of the National Research Council and the National Reading Panel, conclude that there is great potential for teacher preparation to impact teaching effectiveness, until now there has been no compelling research that documents the specific qualities of effective teacher preparation programs. Indeed, until now there have been no conclusive data about the impact of quality preparation on teaching effectiveness.

There are a number of general claims that can be made about college- and university-based teacher preparation. First, the evolution toward college- and university-based teacher preparation has been crucial in raising the

level of professionalism among teachers. Second, and specific to literacy instruction, there has been a tremendous growth in attention to reading, with colleges and universities increasing their requirements for the number of semester hours that students study reading. Third, the research base on acquisition of reading skills and effective teaching practices has grown exponentially over the past quarter century,

providing a rich curriculum base for teacher preparation. And fourth, the majority of teachers enter teaching reporting that they “feel prepared.” In other words, colleges and universities have made valuable progress—and there is much to commend in current preparation programs.

However,

there are troubling realities in college- and university-based programs that prepare classroom reading teachers. There is tremendous variation in the content and experiences provided across the 1,150 teacher preparation programs in the United States. Some programs require as little as one three-semester course in reading methods, while others offer as many as 18 semester hours in reading coursework that covers topics ranging from the structure of English to teaching reading comprehension. Some programs offer no practicum hours in public schools with supervised, “hands-on” experiences in reading, while others offer as many as 50 to 60 hours every semester.

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Some programs are well funded and guided by faculty with doctoral degrees in reading, while others are poorly funded and forced to rely on adjunct or part-time faculty with limited expertise in reading teacher preparation.

For colleges and universities to play a significant role in achieving the goal of a quality teacher in every classroom, they must examine seriously the content and structure of their reading teacher preparation programs. In this spirit, the International Reading Association (IRA) conducted a major research study into the preparation of classroom teachers in reading. The major premise for this effort is simple. There are many effective preparation programs in reading in the country

today. These programs graduate teachers who make a fairly seamless transition into full teaching responsibilities and who are highly effective at teaching reading. Through a careful and systematic study of some of these programs, we can learn about the essential qualities of effective programs and document their impact on graduates and their students. The knowledge and insights generated through this investigation can spur significant reflection and improvement. Further, findings from a study that documents the impact of quality teacher preparation on teaching effectiveness can be used to leverage resources for much-needed increased investment in teacher preparation.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION STUDY

As the world's largest organization of reading professionals, the International Reading Association takes reading—and teaching—seriously and personally: About 60 percent of our 80,000 U.S. members teach in elementary schools, where they are responsible for helping students learn to read and read to learn. Many others teach in middle schools and high schools and in colleges and universities nationwide.

The International Reading Association has a long history of providing leadership in teacher education and professional development. We want to be at the forefront of making the reading teacher profession stronger in the future.

To that end, in 1999 we convened the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction. We asked the Commission to study teacher preparation and provide leadership for change. Specifically, we asked the Commission to:

- conduct a national survey of almost 950 reading teacher educators in colleges and universities to gauge current practices in reading teacher education;
- identify the common characteristics of excellent reading teacher preparation programs so that other colleges and universities can scrutinize and improve their own programs; and
- conduct a major, comparative study of the effectiveness of the graduates of excellent reading teacher preparation programs in terms of classroom practices and student achievement.

Twenty-eight colleges and universities applied to participate in this study, providing detailed descriptions of their programs, vignettes of classroom teaching and learning by recent program graduates, and critiques of these

vignettes by program faculty and students and by public school principals and teachers. In a competitive process, an independent, blue-ribbon panel of reading experts identified eight institutions with outstanding credentials for preparing excellent reading teachers in their teacher preparation programs.

The International Reading Association invited these eight programs to participate in this study, with their key faculty members serving on the Commission. These eight programs represent a diversity of public and private institutions, large and small, in communities across the United States. We wanted a wide range of programs, with a balance of factors such as school size, mission, and geographic region, to participate in this study to enable us to draw conclusions and



make recommendations that will resonate among teacher educators nationwide.

However, it is important to note that while these programs are exemplary, their selection does not imply that they are the “best” programs or the “only” ones with strong reputations and results in reading teacher preparation. Far from it. There are many fine programs that exemplify the findings here—and many teacher educators will recognize the features of good practices in their own programs. For these programs, the findings provide confirmation and reassurance that they are doing well even as they step up their efforts to meet the challenges of the teacher crisis.

The Commission’s quasi-experimental study of these eight programs has involved dozens of researchers, hundreds of classroom teachers, and thousands of elementary school students. Data collection has lasted for more than three years. The study is, to our knowledge, the most comprehen-

sive longitudinal research into reading teacher preparation ever conducted.

Significantly, ours is one of a mere handful of research studies on the effectiveness of reading teacher preparation that actually examines beginning teachers in the field, where it counts most. Our research review found that most other studies concentrate only on the quality of teaching and learning within the college or university setting.

In our study, we followed 101 recent program graduates for three years in the classroom, tracking the attitudes and effectiveness of teachers from programs with a reading specialty, programs that infuse literacy teaching into their education courses, and general education programs without an emphasis on literacy. We compared these graduates of Commission programs to teachers who also were fully certified from a range of other programs. Our goal in making these comparisons is to examine the impact of the highest quality preparation.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH METHODS

The Commission used multiple research methodologies for this study. We launched our work with a survey to study reading teacher preparation programs and practices nationwide. Hoffman & Roller (2001) details the full report of procedures for this survey.

The data gathered during the second and third years included observations of classroom teaching as well as measures of student achievement using standardized testing. We analyzed these data using a variety of statistical procedures, ranging from hierarchical linear modeling to analysis of variance to regression. The research procedures and complete findings can be found in the technical report for this project (Hoffman et al., 2003).



We used a quasi-experimental design for the longitudinal study of teachers, with “program” as the treatment variable and a variety of outcome measures considered as dependent variables. The data gathered from first-year teachers came from structured, in-depth interviews conducted throughout the year with both Commission program graduates and comparison teachers. The data analysis of these interviews was primarily qualitative. The procedures and findings from this analysis of first-year data are reported in Maloch et al., 2003.

We identified critical program features by using qualitative methods during the first year of the study and throughout the project. The research procedures for this part of the study can be found in a report by Harmon et al., 2001.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Commission's key findings provide compelling evidence that an investment in quality reading teacher preparation at the undergraduate level contributes to effective teaching and learning of reading in elementary schools. Specific findings include the following:

Teachers who are prepared in quality reading teacher education programs are more successful and confident than other beginning teachers in making the transition into the teaching profession. First-year teachers from Commission reading teacher preparation programs believe that the coursework and field teaching experiences of their undergraduate years are extremely relevant to the demands of classroom teaching. Maloch et al. found that these graduates use their theoretical and practical training in their everyday teaching. Here is a comment from a typical first-year teacher from an excellent program:

I specialized in reading, [learning everything from] comprehension to phonics to reading in content areas. Because there were so many classes that were so diverse, I really feel like my program covered most areas in reading. The tutoring was very useful. All the coursework that required actually going out into the classroom and teaching reading was very good because it was very realistic. It was hands-on.

First-year teachers who did not attend exemplary programs in reading teacher preparation voiced very different views about the usefulness of their coursework and practical experience for the realities of teaching reading. They did not view their preparation as particularly useful in their teaching.

Again and again in interviews, teachers who are well prepared to teach reading expressed confidence in their knowledge and instructional

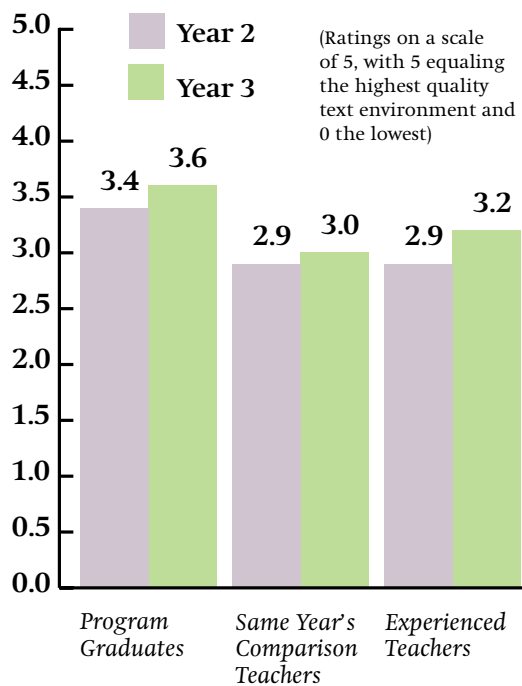
practices, while teachers who are less prepared expressed their frustration at the disconnect between their training and their teaching. Both groups of teachers teach in the same kinds of schools with the same kinds of constraints and challenges, from prescribed reading programs to disadvantaged students. But the better prepared teachers are so well grounded in their vision of literacy and their ability to teach reading that they are more comfortable finessing the system, enriching the program, and drawing from a repertoire of strategies to help struggling readers.

Indeed, principals and other supervisors of many of the better prepared teachers observed in interviews that these teachers hit the ground running when they started teaching—even mentoring other, more experienced teachers in reading instruction within their first three years of teaching.

If more of America's teachers entered the profession with this competence and self-assuredness, it would make a profound difference to students as they learn to read. Teachers who experience early success may be less likely to burn out and leave the teaching profession—as more than one in three new teachers now do within their first three years of teaching. And teachers who know how to help struggling readers and language-minority students, for example, may be more likely to accept teaching positions in the most challenging schools—where they are needed most. Some beginning teachers from Commission programs, in fact, expressed great personal satisfaction about working in such schools.

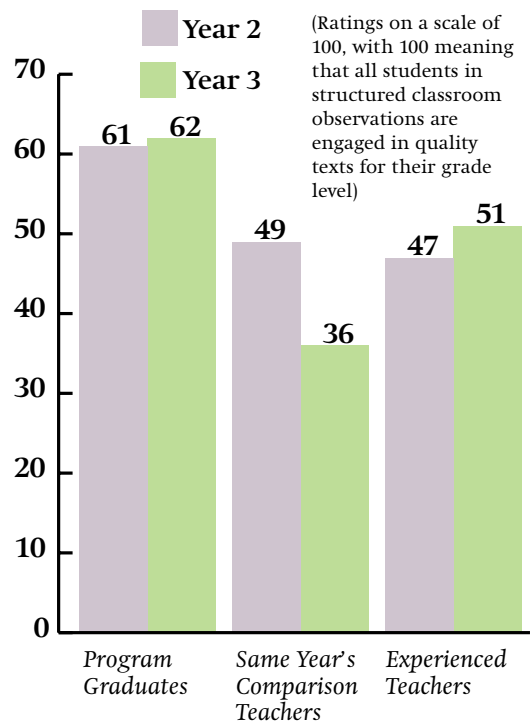
Teachers who are educated in quality reading teacher preparation programs are more effective in creating a rich literacy environment in their classrooms, preparing students to read, and engaging them in reading than teachers who are not. Compared to other teachers—even experienced teachers rated as “excellent” by their principals—graduates of Commission programs create a more sophisticated environment for literacy, using a greater quality, variety, and quantity of children’s books and other texts in their classrooms. (See Figure 1.) Further, they achieve higher levels of student engagement with these texts. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 1
Quality of the Text Environment



Teachers from Commission programs provided a better quality text environment than both comparison second- and third-year teachers and experienced teachers. These results are consistent over two years and are statistically significant.

Figure 2
Engagement With Texts in the Literacy Environment



Teachers from Commission programs engaged their students more meaningfully in classroom texts than both comparison second- and third-year teachers and experienced teachers. These results are consistent over two years and are statistically significant.

These patterns of teacher effectiveness are especially remarkable because they represent results from first-, second-, and third-year teachers. Even at this early stage of their teaching careers, teachers who are prepared in quality reading teacher education programs are teaching in measurably different ways than most other teachers. Even more striking, graduates of exemplary programs perform at levels that meet or exceed the standard of experienced teachers who are rated as “excellent” by their principals. In their third year of teaching, graduates of exemplary reading teacher preparation programs continue to maintain their advantage over other third-year teachers from less rigorous programs or those without focused attention on reading.

Student achievement in reading is higher for students who are engaged in the kinds of literacy activities that teachers from quality reading teacher preparation programs provide. Students whose teachers are educated in quality reading teacher preparation programs benefit from the instruction they receive. High levels of engagement with quality texts are the foundation for growth in student achievement.

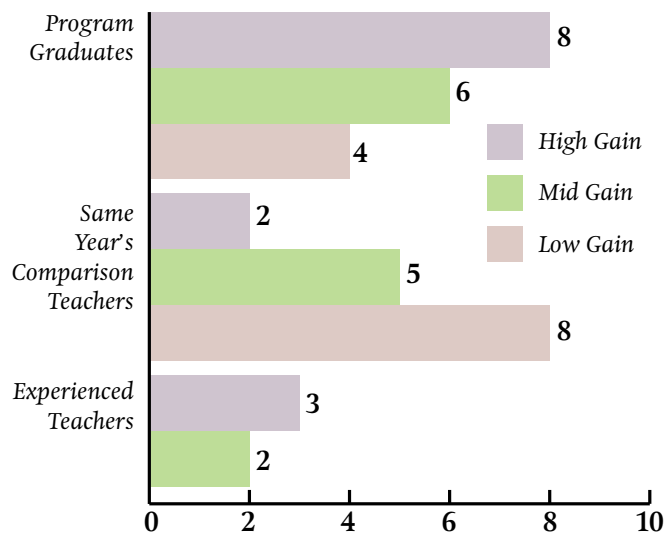
The Commission discovered a strong and statistically significant relationship between the quality of the text environment, student engagement with the texts in the environment, and growth in reading comprehension. (See Figure 3.) Growth in reading comprehension was measured on pre-post administrations of a standardized test of reading achievement (the GRADE test; AGS, 2000) in the third year of the study. The strength of these relationships confirms the importance of the differences between Commission program graduates and comparison teachers on the qualities of the text environment.

Figure 3
Factors That Correlate With Student Growth in Reading Comprehension

	Correlation to growth in reading comprehension	Statistical significance (in p values)
Text environment in the classroom	.57	p<.01
Student engagement with texts in the classroom	.48	p<.05

The Commission study found strong and statistically significant correlations between the classroom text environment and student growth in reading comprehension, as measured on standardized tests. Teachers from Commission programs were more likely to foster a rich text environment and student engagement with the texts than other teachers were.

Figure 4
Student Growth in Reading Comprehension



Students of teachers from Commission programs averaged higher rates of growth in reading comprehension on standardized reading tests than students of both comparison second- and third-year teachers and experienced teachers.

The Commission conducted further analysis of achievement data using class gain scores to compare students of a subset of teachers from Commission programs and students of other teachers. We averaged the gain scores on reading comprehension for each classroom and labeled them from highest to lowest in gains. We labeled the top third of the classrooms High Gain, the middle third Middle Gain, and the lowest third Low Gain. The teachers from the Commission sites were overrepresented in the High Gain classrooms (eight teachers) and underrepresented in the Low Gain classrooms (four teachers). Of the comparison teachers with the same years of experience, two ranked in High Gain, and eight ranked in Low Gain. In fact, the distribution of teachers from the Commission sites in this ranking closely reflects the distribution of experienced and expert teachers. (See Figure 4.)

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS IN READING?

As part of this study, the Commission characterized the key features of a quality, four-year baccalaureate program in reading teacher preparation. In site visits, structured interviews, and small-group meetings with program faculty, the Commission gathered data about each of the eight programs. They also convened representatives of each program for six meetings over the course of three years to analyze the data and identify the critical features of excellence common to all the programs.

The research findings of the eight critical features of excellence listed here are explained in more detail in the materials that accompany this executive summary. In addition, we provide guidance for strategic planning for colleges and universities interested in examining their own programs in light of these critical features.

The Commission research findings are exciting because there are many areas of convergence with the *Standards for Reading Professionals*, revised 2003 (IRA professional standards) and the National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE) standards and processes. Of the 1,150 colleges and universities with education programs in the United States, just over 550 institutions are accredited by NCATE; another 110 are in the process.

For example, the NCATE accreditation process requires colleges and programs to develop a vision statement around which they unify their programs. The related Commission research finding is: Teacher educators center their program around a vision of literacy, quality teaching, and quality teacher education. The elaborated

description of vision in the accompanying insert may have an echo of familiarity to educators engaged in NCATE accreditation processes.

Another Commission research finding is: Teacher educators engage preservice teachers with a comprehensive curriculum and guide them toward a cohesive knowledge base for effective teacher decision making. In the elaborated description of this finding, the text identifies the following key topics:

- early literacy, including oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, and word identification;
- fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension;
- assessing all aspects of literacy learning; and
- organizing and managing literacy instruction across grade levels.

This language overlaps with the language of IRA Professional Standard 1.4.

The professional standards developed by IRA and NCATE are distinct from the Commission research findings in that Commission findings come directly from a research study, which used a quasi-experimental design blending qualitative and quantitative methods. The IRA and NCATE standards, while they reference research and represent principles for which research evidence can be marshaled, do not come from research. They both are developed through a professional consensus process. No particular standard or process arises from a particular research study.

Hence, the Commission research findings provide, for the first time, research evidence identifying critical features of teacher preparation programs that produce excellent classroom teachers of reading.

EIGHT CRITICAL
FEATURES OF
EXCELLENCE IN
READING TEACHER
PREPARATION
PROGRAMS

1 **CONTENT** Teacher educators engage preservice teachers with a comprehensive curriculum and guide them toward the development of a cohesive knowledge base for effective teacher decision making.

2 **APPRENTICESHIP** Teacher educators engage their preservice teachers in a variety of course-related field experiences where they have opportunities to interact with excellent models and mentors.

3 **VISION** Teacher educators center their program around a vision of literacy, quality teaching, and quality teacher education.

4 **RESOURCES AND MISSION** The teacher education program has sufficient resources (intellectual, financial, and professional) to support the mission for quality teacher preparation.

5 **PERSONALIZED TEACHING** Teacher educators value diversity and are prepared to offer their preservice students responsive teaching and an adapted curriculum.

6 **AUTONOMY** Teacher educators are active in adapting and negotiating with their institutions to make sure their students receive the most effective preparation possible.

7 **COMMUNITY** Teacher educators work to create an active learning community that includes the faculty, their students, and mentor teachers.

8 **ASSESSMENT** Teacher educators continually assess their students, their program, their graduates, and themselves to guide instructional decision making and program development.

NEXT STEPS FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

To experienced teacher educators, none of these features will come as a surprise. They make sense. But they are not easy to achieve. In fact, none of the eight programs in the Commission study excelled at all of the features. All eight sites, though, were working on one or more of the features to strengthen their own programs—and all the sites believe the eight features are critical standards of excellence.

and universities will need to examine their programs in light of all eight critical features. The features do not represent a pick-and-choose menu, but rather a comprehensive, integrated portrait of excellent programs. No one feature is more important than any other. Moreover, while the features are focused specifically on effective reading teacher preparation, the issues they raise likely will require a broader consideration of teacher preparation in general.

Finally, educators should view the features not as a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach to excellence, but as center-



The Commission's research findings bolster the credibility of the IRA and NCATE standards. The Commission did not set out to support the professional standards. The findings of critical features reported here spring directly from the research, not from any preconceived notions about professional excellence. Still, educators seeking to improve their programs can work toward the same goal whether they use IRA and NCATE standards or Commission research findings. Both represent valid paths toward self-study, reflection, and improvement.

For programs to improve, colleges

ing points for conversations and inquiry that will lead to program improvement. Indeed, the Commission found that the features play out very differently from one site to another in our study. For example, a small program builds a community of learners for its two or three dozen undergraduates through many face-to-face opportunities to discuss teaching and learning. By contrast, a university program with hundreds of undergraduate students uses an electronic system that extends the community of learners to graduates and classroom teachers. As in all teaching, context shapes effective strategies.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES—THE NEXT FRONTIER IN IMPROVED READING ACHIEVEMENT

Over the past decade, researchers, teachers, and public officials have come together to address student achievement in reading on a number of fronts:

- The National Research Council synthesized the best research on how children learn to read—or don't—in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*.
- The National Reading Panel (NRP) critiqued the effectiveness of instructional practices in *Teaching Children to Read*. The International Reading Association's summary of this report (available at www.reading.org/advocacy/nrp) provides a quick reference guide to the key topics and links to related IRA resources.
- The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education developed standards of accreditation for teacher preparation programs.
- The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards developed rigorous credentialing standards for teacher certification.
- The International Reading Association contributed to this decade of progress with comprehensive *Standards for Reading Professionals* and with *Making a Difference Means Making It Different*, a set of comprehensive principles that honor children's rights to excellent reading instruction.

Now, the challenge is for colleges and universities to join these efforts by making meaningful improvements to their reading teacher preparation programs. With this Commission report, the International Reading Association offers tools for educators who are ready to begin the work of examining their own programs, including descriptions of the features of excellence, models of best practices, and probing questions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Teacher educators in colleges and universities must play a major role in improving student achievement in reading for generations to come:

- Question the research base for all policy recommendations.
- Use the eight critical features of excellent reading teacher preparation programs to critique and improve programs.
- Collect data on the effectiveness of program graduates who are teaching reading in the field.
- Build the capacity for continuous improvement to reflect new research and best practices about reading—and to respond to changing needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND FUNDERS

A stronger force of reading teachers and improved student achievement in reading can be realized with the help of federal, state, and local policy makers; funding agencies; and foundations:

- Question the research base for all policy recommendations.
- Ask for evidence that colleges and universities are improving reading teacher preparation by using the eight critical features of excellent programs.
- Ask for evidence that program graduates are effective in the field.
- Make policy and funding decisions that give colleges and universities the support to improve their programs.
- Invest in further research on the effectiveness of reading teacher preparation programs, including five-year undergraduate, fifth-year master's degree, and alternative certification programs.
- Invest in further, large-scale research tracing the impact of teacher preparation on student achievement.

FOR FURTHER READING

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COMMISSION STUDY SITES

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY is Miami's public research university, with more than 32,000 students enrolled. The Commission studied the elementary education program, which is designed to meet the needs of diverse populations and is infused with standards from Teachers of English to Students of Other Languages. Participating faculty: Joyce C. Fine

HUNTER COLLEGE is one of the four "senior" colleges in the 22 colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY) system. More than 20,000 students are enrolled in undergraduate and graduate studies at its Manhattan campus. The Commission study focused on the QUEST (Quality Urban Elementary School Teachers) undergraduate program with its priority on urban schooling. Participating faculty: Deborah Eldridge, George Gonzalez, and Alene Smith

INDIANA UNIVERSITY AT BLOOMINGTON AND INDIANAPOLIS embraces a core campus concept, whereby faculty and administration cross campus lines. The schools of education at these two sites prepare more than 1,000 teachers every year. The Commission's work focused on the reading minor and learning to teach/teaching to learn cohort programs. Participating faculty: Amy Seely Flint and Christine Leland

NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY IN VIRGINIA is one of the nation's largest historically black universities, with more than 7,000 students. At this site, the Commission studied the courses and experiences to teach reading embedded in the early childhood education endorsement. Participating faculty: Denise M. Littleton and Mona Bryant-Shanklin

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA AT RENO is the "flagship" research institution in Nevada, with more than 15,000 students. The Commission focused on the literacy studies emphasis within the undergraduate elementary program at this site. Participating faculty: Donald Bear, Diane Barone, Cynthia Brock, Julie Pennington, and Shane Templeton Research assistant: Connie Poulton

THE UNIVERSITY OF SIOUX FALLS in South Dakota is a Christian liberal arts college that emphasizes servant leadership at the heart of the teacher education program. Although only about 50 beginning teachers graduate each year, the university is recognized as a state literacy leader for renewal of school and classroom literacy practice. The Commission focused on the elementary education certification program at this site. Participating faculty: Rachele Loven

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN is the "flagship" research institution in Texas, with more than 50,000 students enrolled. The Commission studied the reading specialization program at this site. Participating faculty: James V. Hoffman and Beth Maloch Research assistants: Misty Sailors, Caitlin Dooley, and Lori Assaf

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT SAN ANTONIO is a comprehensive, Hispanic-serving institution, with more than 22,000 students enrolled at this urban university. The reading specialization program was the focus for the Commission's work at this site. Participating Faculty: Miriam Martinez, Janis Harmon, Susan Keehn, Wanda Hedrick, and Bertha Perez

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