

LRA Response to the NCTQ Review of Teacher Education Programs

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We recommend that all [Literacy Research Association \(LRA\)](#) members reach out to media, school leaders, and hiring personnel to remind them to attend to teacher education program ratings and evaluations that are valid and reliable rather than glossy, surface level reviews of syllabi. The adage, “you need to eat at the restaurant to review it, not just look at the menu,” comes to mind.

As professional organizations dedicated to high-quality literacy education and teacher education, [LRA](#), drawing on quoted sources from the [International Reading Association \(IRA\)](#) and the [National Council of Teacher English \(NCTE\)](#), provide this response to the National Council on Teacher Quality’s (NCTQ) “[Teacher Prep Review](#).” Our response focuses primarily on the literacy-related components of the review.

NCTQ evaluated more than 1,100 colleges and universities across the U.S. By offering a four-star, “consumer tool,” NCTQ claims to provide judgment about which teacher education programs are the best and worst. NCTQ’s methods included an evaluation of admissions standards, the syllabi of literacy-related courses, and the textbooks used in those courses. There was neither an attempt to check on the quality of field-based practices nor to check the reliability of data collected. This review is the latest chapter in [NCTQ’s riddled history](#). As literacy-focused organizations, we offer an alternative vision for what makes “quality” in literacy teacher preparation.

By offering this statement, we join a crescendo of critical responses to the NCTQ review. The Association of American Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) President and CEO Sharon Robinson provided a detailed [rebuttal of the methods](#) used in the NCTQ report. AACTE has also provided a portal for rebuttals. More than a score of [responses sent by national organizations, colleges, and universities](#) were posted within the first 36 hours.

The National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) Conference of English Education (CEE) provided [this analysis of the NCTQ methods](#) back in 2011 when the NCTQ requests for data were just starting. [Many colleges and universities did not actively participate in NCTQ’s data collection because of the lack of valid methods](#) and the cost—\$10,000s in personnel hours—money better spent in teacher prep classrooms rather than on an invalid report. [Some programs evaluated by NCTQ do not even exist](#). In addition, NCTE’s CEE Chair Louann Reid, has issued a [statement about the need for more helpful evaluations](#) for continuous program improvements.

We would be remiss, however, if we did not seize this opportunity in the spotlight to highlight some of the productive work our colleges and universities, professional organizations, and publishers are doing to ensure high-quality literacy teacher education—and were doing long before the NCTQ report. Additionally, we would like to take the opportunity to leverage support for continuous improvements.

- **Attending to the Deep Research Base on Excellent Preparation for Teachers of Literacy**
Many of our members actively engage in research and practices that demonstrate excellence in the preparation of classroom teachers and literacy specialists. As a community, our research addresses diverse topics within literacy education and teacher education. For example, [IRA’s research on teacher preparation](#) demonstrated how a wide variety of programs achieve excellent student learning results and kudos from school leaders. Many of our professional journals offer research on the best ways to prepare excellent literacy teachers (see, for example, the bibliographies for research studies on Professional Development/Teacher Education from NCTE’s *Research in the Teaching of English* [here](#)).

NCTQ’s singular focus on “the five elements of reading” is neither broad nor deep—nor is it helpful for preparing teachers for diverse classrooms. Any report that talks of students as though they’re all alike—as the NCTQ review does—neglects the reality of today’s diverse classrooms.

We encourage close attention to findings from research studies that have demonstrated the excellence of many diverse literacy teacher education programs. This research addresses how to teach teachers to meet the needs of students who may not have had a meal before coming to the classroom; the needs of students who have learning disabilities; the needs of students who are multilingual; the needs of students who are gifted; and the needs of students who struggle with eyesight, hearing, and other physical problems that may influence literacy learning. This research-based on teacher education and literacy learning is broad and deep.

- **Supporting Valid Evaluations that Support Effective Literacy Education Programs**

Understanding what makes an excellent teacher—one who creates learning opportunities and stays in the profession—is essential for districts and school hiring personnel. The [nation’s teacher work force loses 15%](#) of teachers every year, effectively meaning that half of the workforce is replaced every three years. Given that experienced teachers are most often better teachers, evaluations of teacher education programs should attend to the need to attract good teachers who stay in the profession.

The [NCTQ’s processes for evaluation are so flawed](#) that any decisions about teacher education made on the basis of the NCTQ review would be detrimental to teachers and—most importantly—children. The review does not attend to teacher retention rates. Nor does it attend to the literacy needs of diverse student populations.

We recommend that only comprehensive, valid evaluations of teacher education programs should be used for decision-making; the NCTQ review is neither valid nor comprehensive. Most states offer reviews of teacher preparation programs, including retention rates, already. Most colleges and universities go through accreditation processes that depend on transparent and extensive data analyses (the [Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation](#) (CAEP) offers an explanation of the difference in quality evaluations between NCTQ’s evaluation processes and accreditation). Local colleges and universities can advise which body accredits and governs programs in your area.

- **Assessing Teacher Education via Accepted Standards**

Teacher education programs, including all literacy-related courses and field placements, are aligned to State standards for K-12 curricula, accreditation, and teacher licensure. This is common practice for all programs in public universities, the very same programs evaluated by NCTQ. However, NCTQ created new “standards” by which to judge programs—none of which are aligned with State curricular, accreditation, or licensure standards. In addition, NCTQ’s claim to have evaluated the integration of the Common Core State Standards is questionable because most of their “data collection” (we use quotes because no researcher would consider NCTQ’s data collection valid or reliable research) occurred prior to the most States’ adoption of the Standards.

- **Celebrate What’s Right and Support What’s Needed**

Teacher educators may know what works, but often political and fiscal support is lacking. There is no rhyme or reason to the funding formulas for supporting teacher education programs. There are universities that have funds to offer small classes, many supervised hours in the field, and tailored curricula. And there are universities that are pressed to churn out hundreds of teachers annually. [Some teacher preparation programs \(not evaluated by NCTQ, but sponsored by the same funders as NCTQ\)](#)

[even get federal funding for offering very few courses, no supervised time in the field, and low levels of guidance.](#) Retention rates and evaluations of effectiveness rarely seem to play into funding formulas.

AACTE's Jane West has offered [this statement about the need for increased fiscal and political support](#) for high quality teacher education programs in general. Additionally, the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) has offered recommendations for improving literacy education and literacy teacher development in its report titled "[Remodeling Literacy Learning: Making Room for What Works.](#)"

We recommend that media, policy, and governments (local, state, and federal) make examples of programs that have been successful, highlight effective features, and invest in creating more high-quality teacher education programs with those effective features.

- **Base Textbook Selection Based on Robust, Professional Choices**

Our organizations publish and have many members who author texts for literacy teacher educators. These texts are research-based, peer-reviewed, and closely edited to ensure that teachers can glean understandings about how to design high-quality instruction for students.

The NCTQ review provides a flawed evaluation of literacy-related textbooks; if used for decision-making, the NCTQ textbook review could be damaging to teachers and children. Their review of the "five elements" of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) neglects to value worthy topics such as writing, motivation, interest, diverse learners, family literacy, multi-literacies, and digital literacies, among others. Additionally, several texts deemed "unacceptable" do indeed address the five elements—perhaps a level of detail easily overlooked by the three novice literacy specialists who were tasked with "reading" textbooks for over 1100 programs in less than a year.

We encourage teachers and teacher educators to read broadly and deeply. We discourage any list that restricts what is taught to a stagnant, limited inventory of early literacy skills. We believe such limits confine learning opportunities for children and are harmful for literacy education. We highly discourage any third-party limitations of textbooks for teacher preparation programs.

Again, we encourage members of LRA to speak out both through communications with policy makers and writing letters to local newspapers. Refer to [IRA's Advocacy Manual](#) and the OpEd Project [here](#) or [here](#) for direction, if needed.

One of the goals of LRA is to conduct and provide literary research to inform its members and the larger profession in ways that improve literacy curriculum and instruction, including literacy teacher preparation. The LRA Policy and Legislative Committee, working colleagues from other organizations, will generate a longer position paper based on current literacy research that will address some of the broader methodological limitations of and false generalizations in the NCTQ report regarding teacher preparation programs for literacy education as well providing a more positive, productive direction for literacy teacher education programs through formulating a set of recommendations for improving these programs.