

USU Earns A+ In Science of Reading Education for Future Elementary Teachers

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USU prepares graduates in elementary education to teach literacy effectively with the science of reading.

In a recent report examining nearly 700 teacher preparation programs across the country, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) gave USU's elementary education programs an A+ ranking for exceptional teacher preparation using the core tenets of the science of reading.

The science of reading is an instructional approach that uses evidence-based literacy practices, particularly in elementary settings. Based on more than five decades of research, the science of reading includes five core components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Targeted instruction focusing on these areas has been shown to vastly increase the success of students who are learning to read.

Future teachers who are educated in the science of reading learn how to recognize and analyze trends in their own classrooms so they can apply evidence-based interventions to help their students excel. Because the science of reading is focused on individual student needs, it leads to increased outcomes for students who may not respond well to less effective teaching methods.

Over the past decade, the growing body of research supporting the science of reading has prompted discussion and action among education leaders and legislators across the nation. During Utah's 2022 legislative session,

a comprehensive bill on incorporating the science of reading into Utah's education curriculum was passed; part of this bill created funding for universities to hire a dedicated science of reading professional to help train future educators.

Jake Downs is USU's newly established assistant professor of science of reading education in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership. Downs has been an adjunct instructor since 2017 and recently earned his PhD in Curriculum and instruction from USU. With nearly a decade of experience in the Cache County School District as a teacher and literacy coordinator, Downs has seen firsthand the difference that the science of reading makes.

"It's that interplay of using broad data and trends to understand what might happen, but also looking at specific students to see how you can drill down on a specific need," he said. "We use data to build a three-dimensional profile of a student, of their individual strengths and weaknesses and proficiencies, so that classroom teachers can tailor instruction to their group."



Dr. Jake Downs

In the NCTQ report, USU's elementary education program was one of 39 undergraduate programs in the nation to receive an A+ ranking for exceeding the targets set by literacy experts for adequate instruction in the science of reading. USU's curriculum also does not include any methods that run contrary to the research.

Downs was introduced to the science of reading while pursuing his undergraduate degree in elementary

education from USU and is excited to see how the program has advanced. "As an undergraduate, I felt that I was receiving a good preparation in literacy instruction, and now almost 10 years later, I'm teaching courses that I took," he said. "The content is the same, but the depth of knowledge that the students are expected to leave the program with is a lot more technical and nuanced. We're helping support our undergraduates and preparing them to become effective classroom reading instructors right out of the gate."

According to Cindy Jones, professor of literacy in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership and director of the USU Literacy Clinic, USU's undergraduate education programs have emphasized the science of reading for decades. "As literacy faculty at a research university, we are dedicated to the science of reading in the courses we teach and the research we conduct," said Jones. "At the USU Literacy Clinic, we prepare future teachers to implement instruction based on the science of reading that puts children on the path to reading success. Our Literacy Clinic motto is 'Literacy Changes Lives!' We see a change for children in their remarkable reading growth and for parents who express gratitude about their child's literacy development. All children deserve the right to read, and our students graduate well-prepared to be outstanding teachers."

Downs is confident that USU will continue to be a national leader in the science of education. "There's no doubt that the science of reading movement nationwide is raising the bar, especially within Utah," he said. "Utah State is known for our [early childhood and elementary education graduates]. I feel our students are being very, very well prepared for classroom instruction."

In addition to his work in education, Jake Downs is the host of the [Teaching Literacy Podcast](#), where he aims to connect practitioners directly with researchers by interviewing experts on their literacy research, what it means for teachers, and how it can be implemented in classrooms.