



Portrait of Practice: Southern Arkansas University

With 2025 underway, TPI-US is excited to continue our work supporting teacher preparation programs. Inspection teams will visit 33 programs this semester, including 25 literacy-focused inspections.

In 2021, responding to requests from states and education-focused non-profits committed to improving literacy outcomes, TPI-US expanded its services to include literacy-focused inspections. These efforts have happened in tandem with states rethinking their literacy preparation policies, a trend that continued in 2024 and



into 2025 (Mullins, 2025). TPI-US inspections assist educator preparation programs (EPPs) all along their improvement journeys, from programs initialing whole-scale change to those tightening and refining core practices.

Among these programs, several EPPs offer an encouraging window into what programmatic improvement actually looks like. One such program is in Magnolia, Arkansas, at Southern Arkansas University. Housed in the College of Education and Human Performance, the Teacher Education department offers a range of preparation pathways, including multiple licensure and non-licensure options in elementary education. TPI-US first worked with SAU in the spring of 2022 and again in the spring of 2024, focusing each time on the program's literacy preparation. This working paper was developed in collaboration with Southern Arkansas University; our discussion of findings and subsequent improvement steps is presented with the agreement of the program's leadership and faculty.

Initial Findings

Results from TPI-US's 2022 inspection revealed several notable findings. First, the initial review documented that the program's literacy coursework covered the science of reading (including each component of structured literacy) but didn't include adequate course-embedded connections to real-world practice such as faculty modeling, peer-to-peer teaching, use of video or simulations that enable teacher candidates to understand how to apply their coursework knowledge. **Quality literacy instruction cannot exist in isolation.** The elements of structured literacy should be interwoven and taught across a program, using varied approaches and opportunities for students to practice research-backed approaches (Hougen & Smartt, 2020).

Pre-service teachers at SAU had ongoing exposure to accurate, evidenced-based coursework but didn't have sufficient practice opportunities with elementary students. These practice opportunities are critical for individual student development and overall program quality. It is not enough to teach high-quality content; pre-service teachers must also be able to learn how to enact evidence-based strategies. As we've written, a program's clinical experiences are a key source of programmatic consistency—or inconsistency—and must be monitored closely.

Scrutinizing clinical experiences can be a shift for many programs that focus exclusively on what is taught and not necessarily on how well students can enact core literacy practices. SAU faculty and program leaders understood this and acted, as discussed below. When clinical experiences are designed and maintained cohesively, students can better bridge the gap between theory and practice, fostering greater adaptability in their learning and application (Fitchett et al., 2018). For these reasons, the TPI-US inspection framework seeks evidence that candidates' field experiences provide opportunities to use high-quality instructional materials aligned to research-based structured literacy and science of reading practices.

Initial inspection findings at SAU also highlighted minimal exposure to high-quality instructional materials and inadequate preparation for candidates to support the literacy development of learners. Proficiency in these areas is equally important and necessary to be included within and throughout the literacy instruction and assessment continuum. As recent NAEP performance documents, literacy proficiency is flagging nationwide. NAEP reports for 2024 that 31% of fourth graders performed at or above the proficiency level in reading, a finding that hasn't changed since 1992 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2024a). Within this underperformance, pronounced gaps between different student groups are especially concerning. Results from 4th- grade reading show that English language learners trailed non-English language learners by 34 points in average reading proficiency, and Black students scored some 26 points behind their white peers (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2024b).

Figure 1: 2022-2024 average score differential for selected subgroups, NAEP 4th grade reading

| STUDENT GROUP | 2022 AVERAGE SCALE SCORE | 2024 AVERAGE SCALE SCORE |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| American Indian/Alaskan Native | 197 | 195 |
| Asian | 241* | 237 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 239* | 235 |
| Black | 199 | 199 |
| Hispanic | 205 | 203 |
| Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander | 207 | 207 |
| Two or More Races | 223* | 220 |
| White | 227* | 225 |

*Denotes statistically significant difference than 2024 performance

Data collated from

https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reports/reading/2024/g4_8/performance-by-student-group/?grade=4#student-group-scores

Each area for recommended improvement at SAU is linked to TPI-US's evidence-based approach to program improvement. After multiple days of reviewing pertinent documents, scrutinizing program performance data, observing teaching candidates and program faculty, and speaking to district partners, TPI-US offered summative findings and suggested next steps.

Actions for Improvement

Following the 2022 inspection, SAU used the TPI-US findings to generate concrete action steps to boost the quality of its literacy preparation. **First, SAU restructured its literacy courses to integrate practice-based learning throughout the program.** Now, when pre-service teachers take their first literacy course, they are assigned to a K-1 classroom to ensure an authentic practice environment for their emergent skills. Following this course, candidates are placed in grade 3-6 classrooms to provide equal exposure to middle and upper-elementary students, who often still need explicit literacy instruction (Arundel, 2024). These classes and practice opportunities allow candidates to observe and directly apply instructional strategies they study in their coursework within real classroom settings. Candidates also gain hands-on experience assessing students, analyzing results, and using data to inform instructional planning, key proficiencies in developing high-quality literacy pedagogy (Hougen & Smartt, 2020).

SAU also realized that enhancing these experiences represented an opportunity to collaborate with partner districts. **Specifically, the program teamed up with districts to select and purchase high-quality instructional materials**, which candidates now use to make evidence-based instructional decisions and design lessons aligned with the key components of literacy development. Using high-quality instructional materials also provided a natural route for bolstering candidates' skills in differentiated instruction. As mentioned previously, TPI-US inspectors noted room for improvement regarding differentiated content for all learners. The program didn't yet have an established vision for differentiated instruction and didn't yet embed linked instruction throughout coursework. In response to these recommendations, program leadership and faculty established a standard research-based definition for differentiation in all program coursework and embedded instruction in differentiation across multiple courses instead of in isolated pockets. **Now, each course strand emphasizes differentiation**, ensuring these elements are seamlessly woven throughout the curriculum.

Ensuring Ongoing Alignment

To ensure the ongoing quality of preparation and candidate performance, SAU uses multiple methods to ensure candidates develop the skills and knowledge to enact evidence-based literacy practices. These are profiled below.

Explicit Modeling and Linked Practice. Instructors model effective, evidence-based strategies, focusing on explicit and systematic instruction. Candidates practice these strategies through peer teaching, scenarios, and other in-class activities. Additionally, SAU provides instructional videos from partnering districts, showcasing effective literacy instruction in real classrooms. Candidates watch and interact with these videos to deepen their understanding.

Practice-Based Coursework: Candidates complete practice-based coursework within their literacy courses. For example, SAU regularly uses a two-step process wherein candidates observe a mentor teacher applying evidence-based literacy strategies in the classroom and then have opportunities to practice the techniques and assessments directly with students. Narrowing the gap between theory and practice is a reliable path to boost candidate development, especially when mentor teachers and instructors provide feedback to support candidates' growth.

Year-Long Residency Experience: Candidates complete a year-long residency in their final year of the program. School-based program partners are trained in the science of reading and effective, evidence-based literacy strategies, enabling them to guide candidates' development. As part of this residency, candidates participate in a seminar course where real-time data from walkthroughs and formal observations are used to tailor sessions based on candidates' specific growth needs. If a candidate struggles in a particular area of literacy, seminar sessions are designed to target that area for improvement. Formal monitoring practices such as these allow teacher candidates to receive precise support.

Results & Challenges

When TPI-US completed its second inspection of SAU in 2024, the inspection team found marked improvement in the program's literacy preparation. The actions above, as well as sharpened programmatic performance monitoring, have yielded highly positive outcomes, as evidenced by feedback from district partners and individual student growth. District partners have consistently remarked on how much better prepared teaching candidates are to teach literacy and implement high-quality instructional materials in their classrooms effectively.

This preparedness has led to **districts actively seeking out SAU** candidates for hiring, recognizing the value they bring in terms of literacy instruction proficiency and readiness to make an immediate impact in their schools. These outcomes affirm that SAU's continuous improvements are not only benefiting the candidates but also meeting the needs of district partners.

Even with these positive developments, the program still faces challenges. The program's yearlong residency creates the opportunity for extended practice, but the distributed nature of placements across the state means SAU must monitor the quality of feedback and support so that all candidates receive the same high level of support as those in nearby districts. This includes providing equitable opportunities for development through the SAU seminar program.

The Bottom Line

SAU program leaders and faculty stepped up to the challenging experience of hosting a rigorous onsite external review to understand literacy program strengths and improvement needs. Learning from the review what could be better for candidates and for the students they teach, SAU took immediate action steps. They also adopted the mindset that continuous improvement is a combination of making big changes right away and committing to the ongoing process of incremental changes that refine, deepen, and sustain program strengths. The second TPI-US onsite review confirmed the impact of these steps on program quality at Southern Arkansas University.

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