

Utah's Future Teachers Excel in USU's Early Childhood and Elementary Education Program

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Elementary education major Madeline Miller provides one-on-one tutoring at the USU Literacy Clinic.

Utah State University's early childhood and elementary education program is preparing future teachers with an emphasis on extensive early classroom experience and evidence-based instruction—and students are thriving. In the 2024–25 academic year, USU students achieved an 89 percent pass rate on the Utah Foundations of Reading Assessment (UFORA), an intensive written exam required for teacher licensure in Utah. Even more impressive, 100 percent of its licensed graduates who are looking for jobs find work in the field.

Reading improvement is a key focus for Utah Governor Spencer Cox. A recent Literacy and Reading Symposium held prior to the 2026 legislative session focused on ways the state can strengthen literacy and get more kids and adults reading. “Our kids deserve high expectations and the support to meet them,” Cox said at the event. “This legislative session, we’re choosing literacy, and we’re choosing our children.”

The elementary education program at USU is taking an active part in supporting childhood literacy. The program's proven excellence is the result of a collaborative effort by faculty across the School of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS). Three faculty members on that team are Jake Downs, Ph.D., Cindy Jones, Ph.D., and Parker Fawson, Ed.D., whose roles in reading instruction, research, and hands-on training are

key to the program's success in preparing future teachers to support Utah's children.

Downs, an assistant professor in TEAL, fellow in the Center for the School of the Future, and USU's designated science of reading professor, brings both research expertise and classroom experience to his work with undergraduate students. A three-time Utah State alumnus, Downs completed his doctorate in 2021 after nearly a decade working in the Cache County School District as an elementary teacher, instructional coach, and district literacy coordinator.



Cindy Jones, Ph.D., Jake Downs, Ph.D., and Parker Fawson, Ed.D.

His primary focus is elementary reading instruction, particularly preparing pre-service teachers to implement practices that are aligned with the science of reading, a research-based approach to reading instruction that teaches learners to connect sounds to letters while building fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

“We’re helping support our undergraduates and preparing them to become effective reading instructors right out of the gate,” Downs said. “I feel our students are very, very well prepared for classroom instruction.”

Downs designs coursework to help students see what science of reading instruction looks like in real classrooms by incorporating state-approved science of reading curricula so students can analyze how lessons are structured and how well they align with research.

To complement their classroom instruction, the program also includes valuable practicum experiences in which pre-service teachers can practice their developing skills with real students, and under the support and supervision of teachers as they implement science of reading instruction. “It’s hard to learn in a vacuum,” Downs explained. “When students can see first-hand how classrooms work to employ the science of reading, it’s a big deal for them.”

Cindy Jones, a professor in TEAL, founded the USU Literacy Clinic in 2013. It provides targeted reading and writing intervention for K-6 students while serving as a hands-on training site for future teachers. The clinic has

become the cornerstone of the program's clinical training in the science of reading.

Jones joined TEAL as a faculty member in 2008 after earning her doctoral degree in literacy education from USU. Over the past 18 years, she has taught undergraduate and graduate courses, mentored students, published research, and served as interim department head of TEAL from 2020 to 2022.

Since fall 2018, every elementary education student at USU's Logan campus is required to complete a 45-hour reading practicum in the Literacy Clinic. The experience mirrors the responsibilities of classroom teaching. Pre-service teachers assess students' reading skills, plan lessons based on those assessments, teach one-on-one sessions with individual elementary-age students, observe and give feedback to peers, receive detailed feedback every week throughout the semester, and seek to employ feedback in subsequent instructional sessions.

"We engage pre-service teachers in a systematic process that reflects their future work as teachers in their own classrooms," Jones explained. "They learn classroom management, how to motivate children, and how to develop and refine reading instruction to accelerate individual students' learning."

The Literacy Clinic has expanded into what Jones describes as a microscool focused on literacy, growing from five volunteer tutors per semester to 72, with 16 weekly tutoring sessions with each session serving up to 10 children. Over the past 13 years, more than 1,700 children have received tutoring services in the Literacy Clinic.

Paula Jones enrolled her daughter in the Literacy Clinic two years ago as a first grader. "She was a good student, but I wanted her to become more interested in books and reading," explained Jones. "Within the first few weeks, I saw a huge difference in my daughter's behavior. Now she grabs books on her own to read without waiting for me or my husband to read them to her."

Jones said the clinic was designed to address the realities new teachers face. "When students graduate and teach in their own classrooms, they will have a wide range of learners with distinctive literacy needs," she said. "I want to help our USU students be prepared to meet those needs and to be successful reading teachers."

Elementary education students participate in multiple practicum experiences before and after their semester in the Literacy Clinic. They also make weekly classroom

visits to Edith Bowen Laboratory School, an on-campus K-6 public charter school, which has some of the highest K-3 reading outcomes in the state. This enables students to observe classroom instruction that is producing those high-level measured results, and they then debrief later with their professors.

Parker Fawson, an early literacy professor in TEAL, is the executive director of the state-funded Center for the School of the Future in CEHS. In 2020, Fawson and his team launched the Teacher Academy program, which gives pre-service teachers continuous immersion in a school setting. Over a three-semester period, elementary education majors can take advantage of part-time employment in a school where they receive quality mentorship from a teacher in real time. Students in this program receive more than 100 hours of additional practicum experience.

"This is a robust clinically based program," said Fawson. "The teachers in these schools are mentoring the practicum students in effective instructional routines leading to improvements in student reading performance. We're infusing their high level of expertise in early reading instruction into the practices of our future teachers."

Remarkably, USU students, even those who are not participating in the Teacher Academy, receive more than 250 hours in practicum experiences before they begin full-time student teaching prior to graduation.

Downs said that the depth and breadth of practicum experiences in the program gives graduates a strong foundation for their career as teachers. "They're still novices—they haven't been the teacher of record for one day yet—but the foundation is so rich," he said. "Compared to less robust programs, when our graduates get into the classroom, we believe that they will really take off."

"We have to do reading right, because it matters so much for kids," Downs continued. "Teachers are the backbone that make that happen, and as an institute of higher education, we are in a unique position to support them."