Report to University Senate via Faculty Council

Committee on Academic Freedom and Responsibility

The Ohio State University

2 November 2026

This report concerns state involvement in teaching and scholarship about reading and reading instruction. No activity is more fundamental to education than reading, and understandably, people who are concerned with education often have strong feelings about the teaching of reading. Yet reading is an inherently complex cognitive and social phenomenon, and scholars do not fully agree on its scientific nature, nor is there consensus on a single ideal pedagogical approach to facilitate its acquisition. At The Ohio State University, most scholars who specialize in reading and reading education work in the College of Education and Human Ecology (EHE). Recently, EHE has encountered challenges in executing teaching and research activities related to reading and reading education. The issue was brought to CAFR.

In 2023, Ohio lawmakers passed HB 33[1], establishing the State's budget for the 2024-25 fiscal year. That bill included a requirement that, starting in the 2024–2025 school year, all Ohio public schools and all teacher preparation programs (public and private) base their reading curricula exclusively on the "science of reading" (hereafter SOR). The SOR is defined in §3313.6028 as "an interdisciplinary body of scientific evidence that:"

> (a) Informs how students learn to read and write proficiently;
> (b) Explains why some students have difficulty with reading and writing;
> (c) Indicates that all students benefit from explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing to become effective readers;
> (d) Does not rely on any model of teaching students to read based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues, including a three-cueing approach.[2]

Additionally, the bill explicitly prohibits the "three-cueing approach", which they define as "any model of teaching students to read based on meaning, structure and syntax".[3]

To ensure compliance by teacher education programs at Ohio's universities, audit metrics were developed and shared by the Ohio Department of Higher Education.[4] The Governor, in collaboration with the State Assembly, awarded a $6.4 million contract with the Meadows

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[1] https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/135/hb33

[2] https://codes.ohio.gov/assets/laws/revised-code/authenticated/33/3313/3313.6028/3-20-2026/3313.6028-3-20-2026.pdf

[3] Ibid. An exception is made for cases where individual students have access to such reading pedagogies written into federally binding documents like Individual Education Plans for students receiving special education services.

[4] Unlike licensing standards, which are written by committee and receive public feedback, it is unclear from available documents how these metrics were developed.

Center for Preventing Educational Risk to audit Ohio teacher education programs[5], including at Ohio State.[6] The audit examined whether the teacher preparation program addressed all audit metrics and looked for evidence of the "three cuing" model was present in any assigned readings, teaching materials, or assignments. After the results of the audit were shared, any institution deemed to be out of compliance needed to bring their programs into alignment by December 2026.[7]

In Spring 2026, auditors from the Meadows Center conducted in-person observations of classes in EHE. They were granted access to all instructional materials, including Carmen shells. The teacher preparation program in the Department of Teaching & Learning at OSU subsequently failed the audit: not because it omitted what the law required (EHE was in 100% compliance), but because the auditors found evidence that some courses contained content deemed to have been banned.[8] Between October 5 and October 23, 2026, the audit team conducted follow-up interviews with instructors (including faculty, lecturers, and graduate teaching assistants) of courses found to contain banned content during the initial review. Additionally, materials for all implicated courses are scheduled for reanalysis by the audit team before the December deadline.

CAFR recognizes the authority of the State of Ohio to establish educator licensure requirements and to specify instructional approaches that teacher candidates must be prepared to implement in PK-12 schools. However, compliance with licensure requirements is distinct from the regulation of university teaching, scholarship, and research. CAFR's concerns are not directed solely toward external mandates but also toward institutional processes used to implement those mandates.

CAFR's mandate

CAFR is charged to "study all conditions which may affect the academic freedom or responsibility of the faculty of the university."[9] If the committee finds "that any such condition or proposed change adversely affects academic freedom, responsibility, or tenure, it shall report that find promptly to the senate for its review." This document constitutes such a report.

CAFR understands academic freedom as the freedom of all those engaged in research and teaching for Ohio State University to research, to seek to publish and otherwise disseminate their research, and to teach, as they judge is appropriate based upon their professional training. This freedom is secure only when:

- its exercise is promoted and protected by both the stated content and actual application of university policy;
- its exercise is not threatened, in policy or effect, by the broader politics and policies that surround the university.

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[5] https://meadowscenter.org/mcper-science-reading-audit-ohio/

[6] These stand separately from the Educator Licensure Standards to which teacher licensure programs must align and for which teacher candidates held accountable and assessed on licensing exams.

[7] The consequence of including material or lessons perceived as misaligned with SOR is that the State Chancellor of Higher Education "shall revoke approval for programs that are found to be not in alignment and do not address the findings of the audit within a year": https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/135/hb33

[8] https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/highered.ohio.gov/science-of-reading/2025/Statewide_Report_2025_FINAL.pdf

[9] For CAFR's mandate, see https://senate.osu.edu/committees/academic-freedom-and-responsibility-cafr

Discussion

The Ohio State University recognizes "the freedom of faculty to teach, conduct research, and publish research findings" and to "discuss in classrooms, in their own manner, any material that is relevant to the subject matter as defined in the course syllabus."[10]

CAFR identifies two distinct bases for concern. [1] Subsequent to the audit, faculty are being compelled to teach a single viewpoint, which raises concerns about whether faculty retain the freedom to teach as they see fit. [2] The current audit, and threat of further audits, have had a chilling effect on faculty research and other scholarly activities. While these negative effects are concentrated upon a relatively small group of faculty at the moment—those who specialize as scholars in the study and reading and the teaching of reading—if academic freedom is not robustly protected for all faculty, it becomes a privilege, not a right.

CAFR's concern is that faculty are being prevented from engaging students in historical, comparative, critical, scholarly examination of reading theories and practices relevant to understanding the development of the field. Academic inquiry and effective teaching require the ability to analyze, critique, and contextualize ideas, including those that may not be widely adopted in practice. University instruction differs from professional training in that it includes examination of the historical evolution of ideas, competing theoretical perspectives, unresolved scholarly debates, and critiques of prevailing approaches. Faculty members must retain the ability to present and discuss relevant scholarship, including both scholarship with which they agree and disagree, when such materials contribute to students' understanding of the field.

The committee is additionally concerned about potential threats to faculty research. Faculty whose fields of study relate to reading and the teaching of reading have strong incentives to ensure that their research and teaching promote ideas congenial to the SOR, regardless of their own assessment of the evidence for and against those ideas.

CAFR has received reports that some faculty members have modified or reconsidered aspects of their scholarly activities in response to uncertainty around audit scope and compliance processes and at times by direction of administration. Regardless of whether such actions were formally required, the resulting environment raises concerns regarding the preservation of independent scholarly inquiry. The University has a responsibility to ensure that faculty can exercise professional judgment regarding their research without fear that legitimate scholarly work will be interpreted as noncompliance and thus result in punishment for themselves and others at the University.

In sum, the implementation of state law and the University's compliance effectively compel faculty speech by requiring them to present a single viewpoint on a complex issue, under the threat of punishment for the entire department and potentially other teacher licensure programs across campus. In absence of a University rule or operational framework for adhering to such laws in ways that maintain the rights of faculty, CAFR finds that these recent actions infringe on academic freedom by restricting faculty who specialize in reading and reading education from teaching and potentially researching reading in their own manner.

[10] https://trustees.osu.edu/bylaws-and-rules/3335-5

Findings

1. CAFR finds that the SOR legislation infringes upon the academic freedom of faculty who engage in scholarship and teaching concerning reading and reading instruction.

2. CAFR finds that the nature of the University's compliance with the legislation, including the manner through which the audit has been executed, contributes to this infringement of academic freedom.

3. CAFR recommends that the University Senate convene an ad hoc committee, comprised principally of faculty with relevant expertise, charged to

    a) study and report to the University Senate on both the relevant legislation and its implementation, including the audit;
    b) develop and propose University rules and mechanisms for future audits to ensure the protection of the academic freedom of faculty.