



## Findings from the End-of-Year Reading Specialist Survey, 2018-19

*Giselle Saleet, Data Analyst; Grace Kim, Research Intern*

### Key Findings:

- Reading Specialists reported having **positive, collaborative relationships** with teachers, principals, and Early Literacy Specialists.
- Reading Specialists identified **several areas of need**, including more feedback from SDP, more training on specific programs, and more time to collaborate with teachers and other Reading Specialists.
- **Student absences and behavior issues** were some of the biggest challenges for Reading Specialists.
- Some Reading Specialists felt they had **too many students** on their caseload and said they lacked adequate time to spend with each reader.
- Reading Specialists reported **high levels of confidence** in their ability to support student learning.

### Introduction

In the 2018-19 school year, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) placed certified Reading Specialists in 37 schools. Reading Specialists were primarily responsible for providing additional support to K-3 students reading significantly below grade level. Typically, Reading Specialists taught daily, specially designed, small-group lessons to address student deficiencies in reading, writing, phonics, and word study.<sup>1</sup>

In spring 2019, the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) administered an end-of-year survey to the 37 Reading Specialists. ORE received 31 completed surveys (a response rate of 84%), and the surveys included 67 open-ended comments.

The survey asked Reading Specialists about the following aspects of their experience:

- Their understanding of student needs, professional responsibilities, and expectations;
- The quality of communication, collaboration, and professional support;
- Challenges and barriers to program implementation; and
- Their confidence in their abilities to support student learning.

<sup>1</sup>A larger Reading Specialist Evaluation is funded by the William Penn Foundation. Additional reports are forthcoming.

# Findings

**About half of respondents (45%) reported working with 31-40 students each week, on average.**

About half of Reading Specialists (45%) reported seeing an average of 41-50 students weekly. About one-eighth (13%) of Reading Specialists reported seeing over 51 students in one week (Table 1).

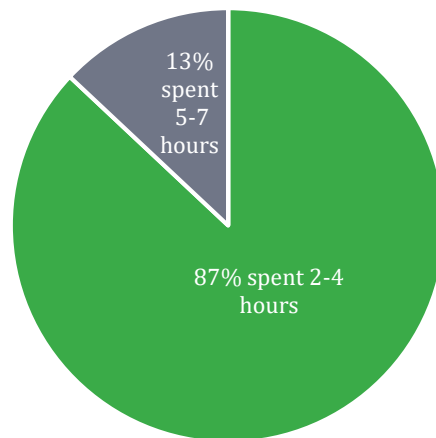
Table 1. Reading Specialist reported seeing a range of 21-51 students weekly (N=31).

Average Number of Students Seen Weekly	% of Respondents
21-30 students	19%
31-40 students	45%
41-50 students	23%
51+ students	13%

Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

On average, most respondents (86%) spent 2-4 hours with students every week (Figure 1). The remainder (13%) reported spending between 5-7 hours with students each week.

Figure 1. Average hours, per week, that Reading Specialists spent with each student (N=30)

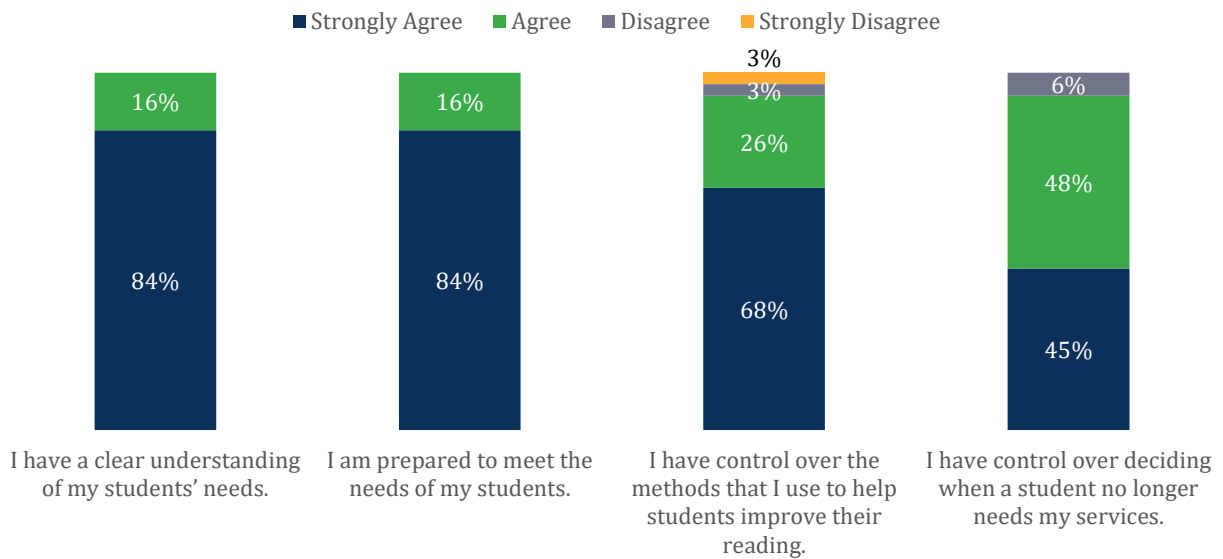


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

## Responding Reading Specialists said they understood student needs and felt prepared to meet them.

All respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they understood—and felt prepared for—students’ needs (Figure 2). Only 6% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” they had control over instructional methods and decisions about whether students need their services.

Figure 2. Reading Specialists reported understanding student needs and being prepared to meet those needs (N=31).

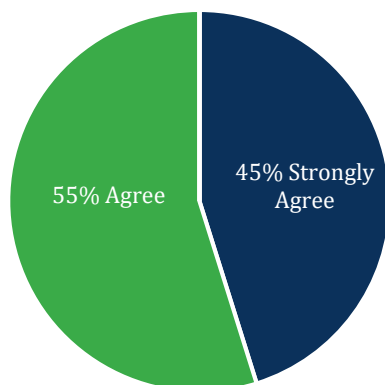


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

## All responding Reading Specialists reported consistent student improvement.

All 31 respondents either “agreed” (45%) or “strongly agreed” (55%) that their students consistently improved. Reading Specialists further reflected on their perceptions of student improvement in open-ended comments (see page 12).

Figure 3. How much do you agree with the following statement: My students are consistently improving (N=31)

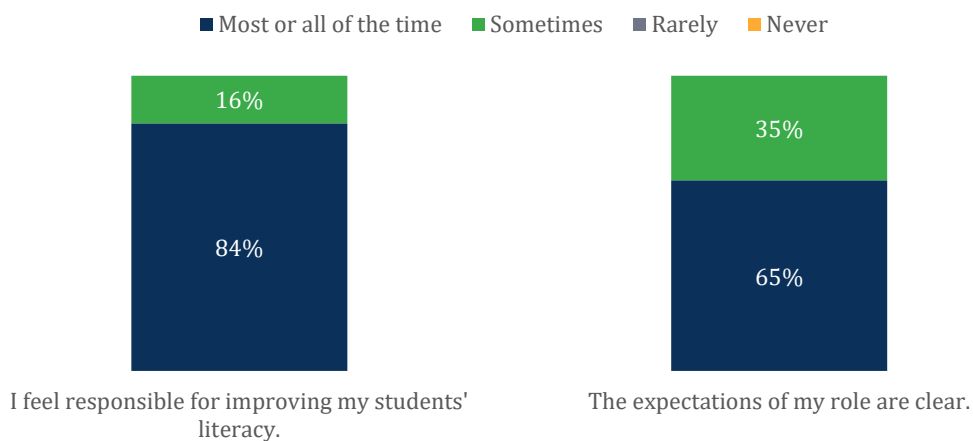


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

### **Responding Reading Specialists felt responsible for the students on their caseload and were mostly aware of the expectations of their role.**

About 84% of respondents felt responsible for improving their students' literacy "most or all of the time," and 35% of respondents felt the expectations of their role were clear "sometimes" (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Reading Specialists reported understanding of their roles and responsibilities (N=31).

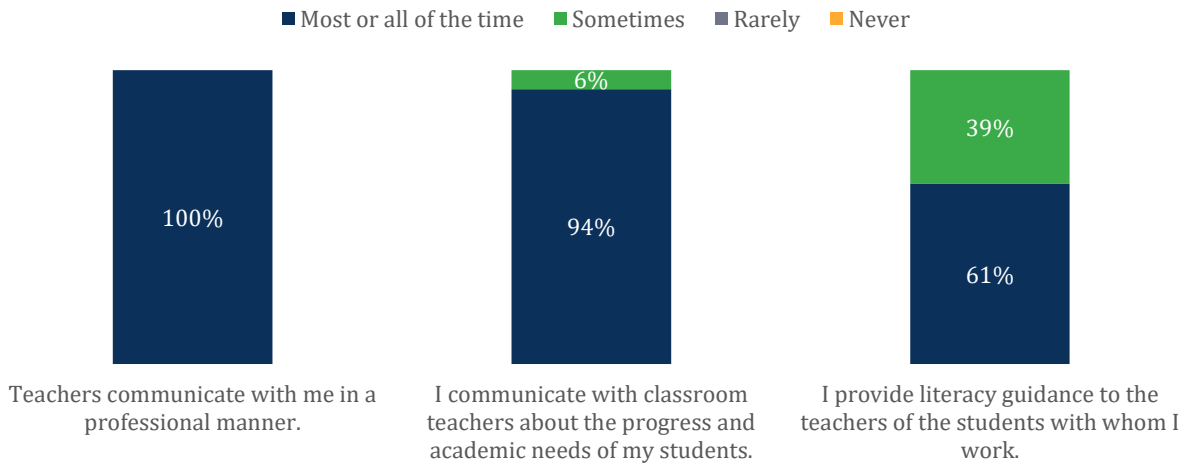


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

## In general, Reading Specialists had a positive relationship with teachers most or all of the time.

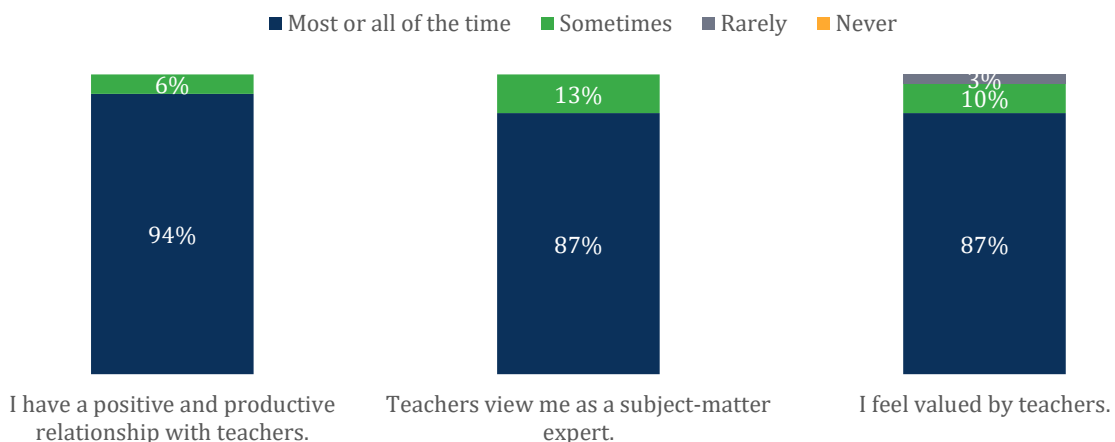
The survey asked Reading Specialists to reflect on their relationships with teachers, principals, and ELS coaches. All respondents (100%) said that teachers communicated with them in a professional manner “most or all of the time.” In addition, most respondents (94%) said they had positive and productive relationships with teachers (Figure 5). However, one Reading Specialist said they “rarely” felt valued by teachers (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Reading Specialists reported communication and collaboration with teachers (N=31).



Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

Figure 6. Most responding Reading Specialists reported productive relationships with teachers (N=31).

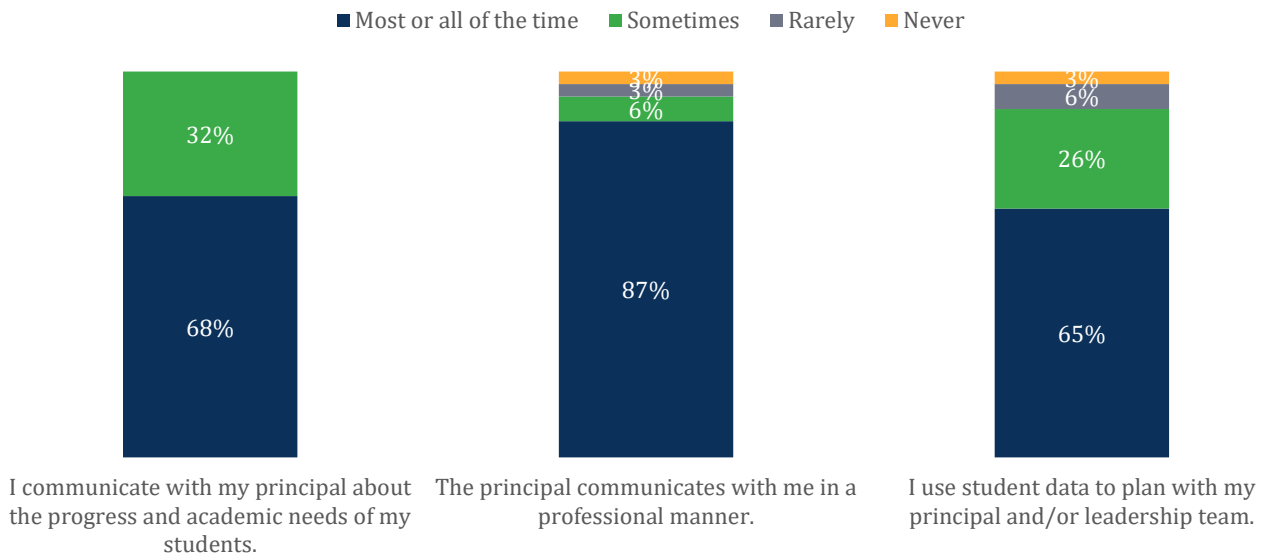


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

## In general, Reading Specialists had a positive relationship with principals most or all of the time.

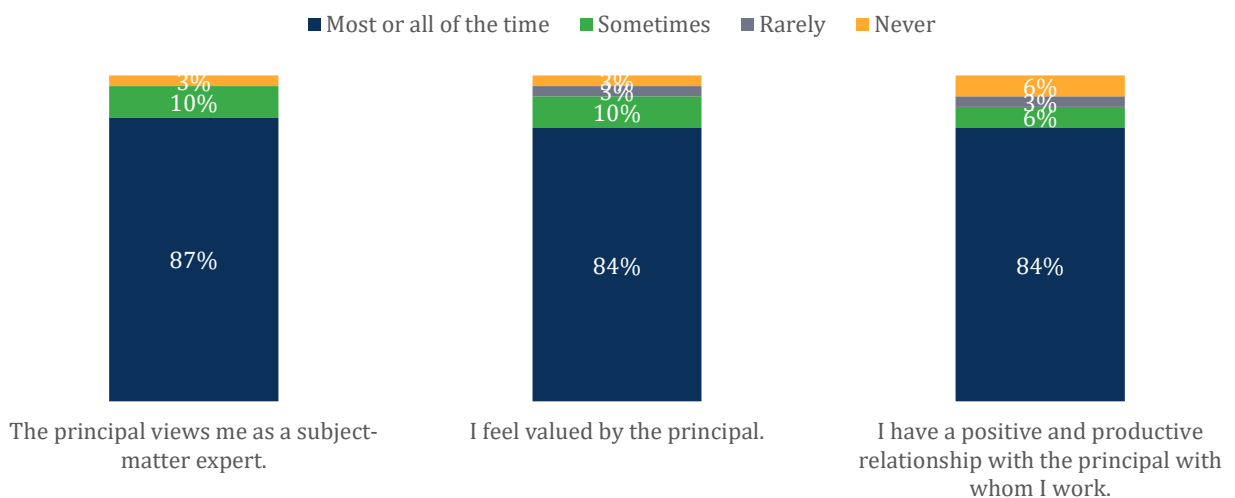
The majority of respondents (68%) said they communicated with principals about their students' progress and academic needs "most or all of the time." In addition, most respondents (87%) said that the principal communicated with them in a professional manner "most or all of the time" (Figure 7) and 84% had a positive and productive relationship with their principal "most or all of the time" (Figure 8). More than 80% of respondents reported that principals viewed them as subject-matter experts and they felt valued "most or all of the time" (87% and 84%, respectively).

Figure 7. All Reading Specialists communicated with principals about student progress (N=31).



Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

Figure 8. Most Reading Specialists had productive relationships with their principals (N=31).

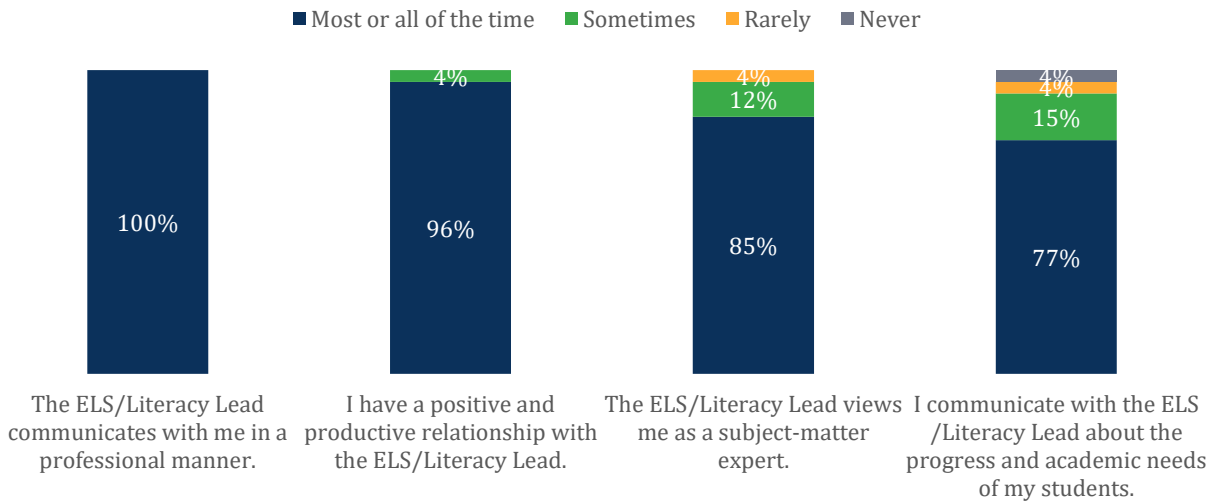


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

**In general, responding Reading Specialists reported they had a positive relationship with ELS coaches most or all of the time.**

All respondents reported that Early Literacy Specialists (or ELS coaches) and Literacy Leads (LLs) communicated with them in a professional manner “most or all of the time.” Nearly all respondents (94%) also had positive and productive relationships with ELS coaches and LLs “most or all of the time;” however, 8% said they “rarely” or “never” communicated with ELS coaches and LLs (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Reading Specialists reported that ELS coaches and Literacy Leads communicated with them in a professional manner (N=31).

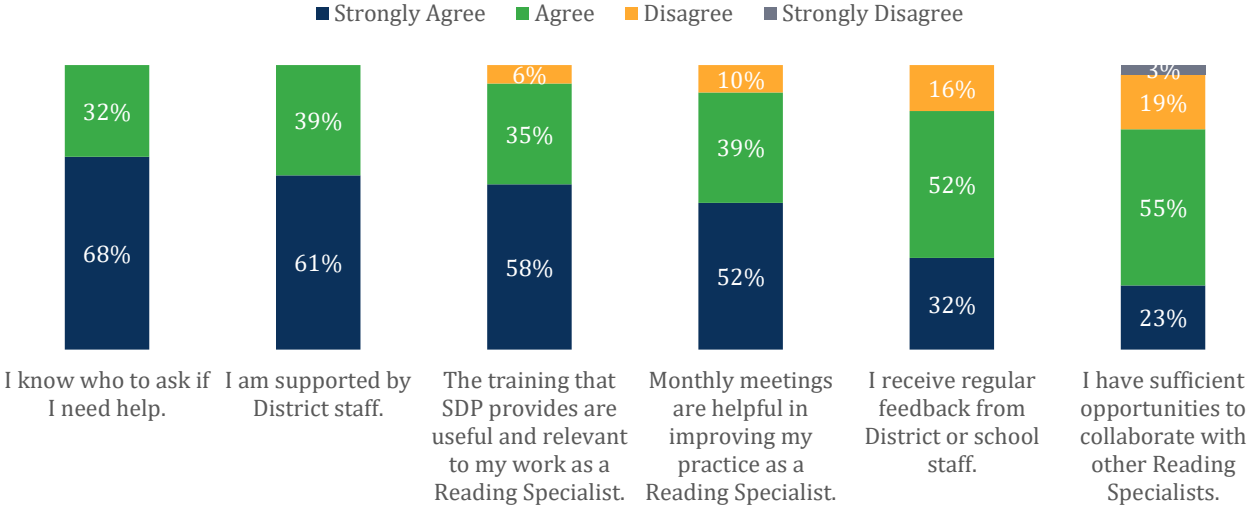


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

# Responding Reading Specialists had mixed feedback about opportunities for support and collaboration.

Some respondents (16%) reported they did not receive regular feedback from District or school staff, and about one-fifth (21%) “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” they had sufficient opportunities to collaborate with other Reading Specialists (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Reading Specialists reported being supported by District staff (N=31).



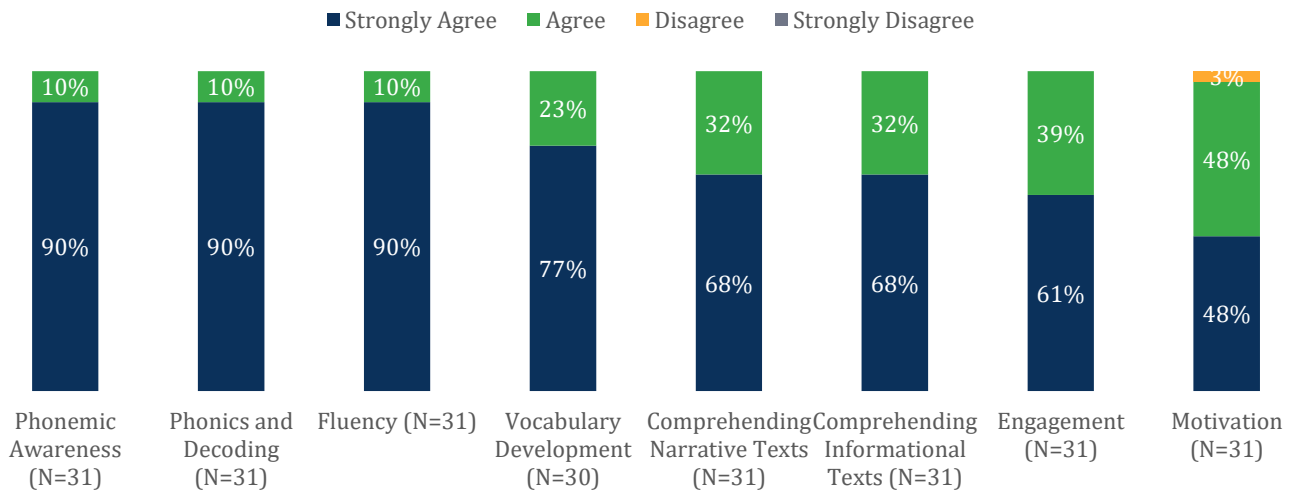
Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey



**Nearly all responding Reading Specialists “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they felt confident engaging and motivating students as well supporting them across all areas of literacy development.**

The survey asked Reading Specialists to report their confidence in supporting students in various areas, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and comprehending informational texts. All respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they felt confident supporting students in most of the foundational skills of early literacy (Figure 11). Reading Specialists reported the most confidence in Phonemic Awareness, Phonics and Decoding, and Fluency, with 90% of Reading Specialists “strongly agreeing” and 10% “agreeing” they felt confident in supporting these skills.

Figure 11. Reading Specialists reported confidence in supporting students in foundational early literacy skills.

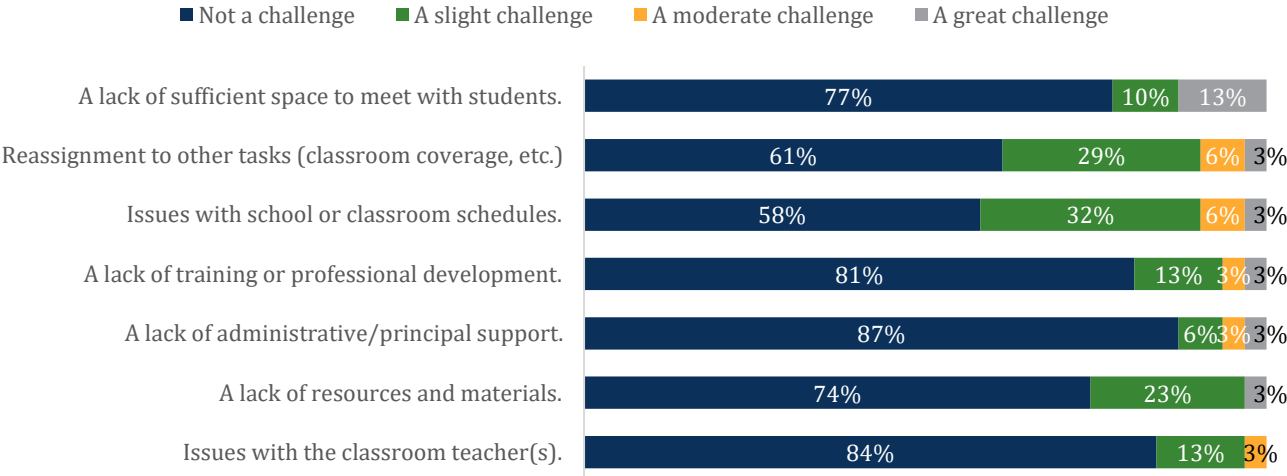


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

## Reading Specialists said there were a few program infrastructure challenges mainly with school spaces and schedule changes.

Thirteen percent of responding Reading Specialists reported that sufficient space was their greatest challenge (Figure 12); this was further expressed in open-ended comments (See page 12). Reassignment to other tasks, issues with school or classroom schedules, a lack of training or professional development, and a lack of administrative/principal support were “great” or “moderate” challenges for 9% of Reading Specialists.

Figure 12. To what degree do you consider each of the following a challenge to your work as a Reading Specialist? (N=31).

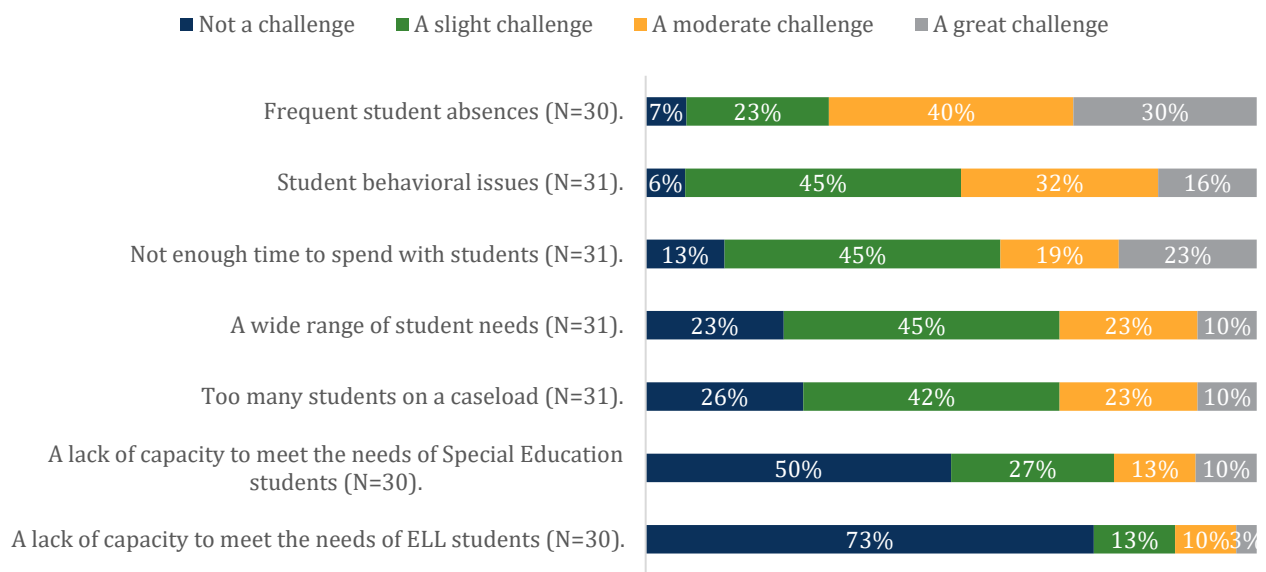


Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

**When asked about challenges related to the needs of students, 70% responded that frequent student absences were either a “great” or “moderate” challenge.**

Additionally, nearly half of respondents said that student behavioral issues (48%) and limited time to spend with students (42%) were a “great” or “moderate” challenge (Figure 13). One-third of respondents (33%) also responded that having too many students on their caseload and a wide range of student needs were a “great” to “moderate” challenge.

Figure 13. To what degree do you consider each of the following a challenge to your work as a Reading Specialist?



Source: Reading Specialist SY 2018-19 End of Year Satisfaction Survey

## **Additional Comments from Reading Specialists**

On the survey, Reading Specialists were asked to provide any additional feedback or information that they felt was relevant to their experience as a Reading Specialist. In total, Reading Specialists provided 67 open-ended comments, which ORE analyzed and categorized into the following themes:

### **Student Progress**

Eight Reading Specialists provided additional feedback about student progress. In their responses, all eight noted that their students made academic progress during their time with them. One Reading Specialist noted, “Many of the students were able to move out of my program because of how they improved.”

### **Collaborations and Meetings**

Nine Reading Specialists provided additional comments on collaborations and meetings with teachers, principals, ELS coaches, and other Reading Specialists. Five Reading Specialists indicated that they would like frequent meetings in order to effectively collaborate with classroom teachers. One commented, “The [biggest] challenge as a Reading Specialist is the lack of time to collaborate with classroom teachers. The RTII model is ineffective without time to collaborate.” Reading Specialists also highly valued meetings with other Reading Specialists and would like more opportunities to collaborate with them.

### **Time and Space**

Ten Reading Specialists wrote about the amount of time they are given to spend with their students and the spaces they work in. Four Reading Specialists said they were not given a quiet classroom space to work with their students. One Reading Specialist commented, “I work in the hallway. It is cramped and I need to retain my students’ attention amidst constant disruptions from students who walk out of their classrooms through our hallway.” Six Reading Specialists expressed that they do not have enough time to work with their students due to coverage issues and the number of students on their caseload. They also said a lack of sufficient time often disrupted their lessons. One commented, “I meet with 10 groups a day, and usually have 52-55 students on my roster. That limits me to approximately 20-25 minutes per group. I use Leveled Literacy, and I don’t have enough time to do 30 minute lessons, as prescribed.”

### **Professional Development and Support**

Nineteen Reading Specialists provided open-ended comments about professional development and support. These comments reflected mixed feelings about District training and support. Approximately half of the responses were positive— eight Reading Specialists expressed appreciation for the help and support that is provided when they actively seek it. On the other hand, 11 Reading Specialists expressed a need for more training in specific programs, such as Wilson and AIMSweb. One Reading Specialist said: “Wilson coaching is nonexistent. I feel like I am teaching

myself, but not doing a great job at it. I need weekly instruction in a classroom setting. I am not good at online learning.”

## **Behavior and Attendance Issues**

Fifteen Reading Specialists provided comments related to student behavior and attendance issues. Frequent absences and Reading Specialists’ lack of control over student behavior issues greatly disrupted group sessions. Absences were an issue for students because “it set them back in the instruction that is given to their group, [and] as a result, frequent regrouping [was] necessary.” Students who displayed negative behaviors adversely affected their own learning and limited progress for the rest of the group. One Reading Specialist commented, “I have a number of students on my caseload that have behavior issues and frequently refuse to participate or follow instructions during lessons. Sometimes their behavior also has a negative impact on the learning of other students in the group.”

## **Parental Support and Engagement**

Five Reading Specialists explicitly stated that they would like to see more parental support and engagement. Three Reading Specialists suggested a stronger family engagement program: “A comprehensive reading support program must include collaboration with administration, teachers, and parents. We need a strong family engagement program.”

## **Areas of Additional Support**

Nine Reading Specialists<sup>2</sup> identified areas for additional support. Most comments directly requested more training for specific programs, such as Wilson, LLI Foundations, and AIMSweb. Others asked for more training to support EL students. One Reading Specialist noted, “I would like more training on interventions that can be put into place with any other program. I would like more time to discuss with other Reading Specialists what works for them.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Of the nine Reading Specialists who provided open-ended comments regarding the need for additional support or training, seven were Cohort 2 Reading Specialists who will receive Wilson and LLI training in the 2019-20 school year.

## Conclusions

In spring 2019, ORE administered an end of the year survey to 37 Reading Specialists and 84% of Reading Specialists completed the survey. Almost half (45%) of responding Reading Specialists reported working with 31-40 students on average a week. The majority (86%) of Reading Specialists reported spending an average of 2-4 hours with students per week.

In general, Reading Specialists reported having a positive relationship with teachers, principals, and ELS coaches most or all of the time (94%, 94%, and 87%, respectively). Reading Specialists said they communicated less frequently with principals about student progress and academic needs (68%) than with teachers (94%) and ELS coaches (77%).

Overall, Reading Specialists reported high levels of confidence in supporting students across all areas of literacy development. Most (90%) of Reading Specialists “strongly agreed” that they felt most confidence in Phonemic Awareness, Phonics and Decoding, and Fluency. Nearly all Reading Specialists reported high levels of confidence engaging and motivating students as well.

Reading Specialists reported few challenges related to the infrastructure of the program and the support that they received. More substantial challenges related to the needs and behaviors of the students whom they serve. Absences and behavior issues were some of the biggest challenges; Reading Specialists indicated these were “great” or “moderate” challenges (70% and 48% respectively). In some cases, there may be too many students on a Reading Specialist’s caseload, leading to a lack of time to spend with students.

Both quantitative and qualitative feedback from the survey indicate that Reading Specialists are receiving sufficient support and training but may benefit from additional feedback and time to collaborate with other Reading Specialists.

For more information on Reading Specialists and the early literacy initiative, see <https://www.philasd.org/research/programsservices/reports/>