

Six Practices for Using Reading Specialists to Support K-3 Student Growth: A Summary of Findings from Interviews with Four Successful Reading Specialists

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Overview

Beginning in 2015, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) hired Reading Specialists to provide additional support to K-3 general education¹ students who are reading below grade level. Typically, Reading Specialists work with small groups of students and meet with each group three to five times per week. They use research-based interventions and resources to develop and implement lesson plans designed to address deficiencies in reading, writing, phonics, and word study.

As of 2018-19, certified Reading Specialists were placed in 38 schools, serving nearly 2,000 students in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). Prior research found that students who receive support from Reading Specialists demonstrate improvements in their literacy skills as evidenced by an increase

Six Practices for Using Reading Specialists to Support Student Growth

1. Administrators recognize the expertise of Reading Specialists and provide Reading Specialists with the time, space, and resources to support students.
2. Reading Specialists communicate and collaborate regularly with teachers and administrators.
3. Reading Specialists rely on guidance from principals, student data, and teacher input to identify students in need of services.
4. Reading Specialists use assessment data to design a customized, research-based approach to serving students.
5. Reading Specialists provide students with consistent and sustained intervention services.
6. Reading Specialists develop systems and processes that lead to greater efficiency and maximize student-learning time.

¹Generally students who are classified as English Learners or have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) do not receive support from a Reading Specialist. However, these students are supported by other services aligned to their particular learning needs.

in their average National Percentile Rank and a reduction in the percentage of students requiring Tier 3 (intensive) intervention on their core AIMSweb assessment.²

In December 2019 and January 2020, the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) conducted interviews with four Reading Specialists to learn about the practices, approaches, and contexts that may lead to improved outcomes for students receiving Reading Specialist support. The purpose of this brief is summarize the themes from those interviews to guide practices in our schools and maximize outcomes for students.

Research Questions

Two research questions guided our analysis:

1. What practices, approaches, and contexts may lead to positive outcomes for students receiving Reading Specialist support?
2. How can those practices inform the work of Reading Specialists across SDP?

Sample & Methods

For this study, we identified a small group of Reading Specialists whose caseload of students demonstrated substantial achievement relative to the caseloads of other Reading Specialists. Four Reading Specialists were identified whose students met the following criteria:

1. At least 60% of students met or exceeded their minimum growth goals as determined by changes in their DRA-informed independent reading level between Quarters 1 and 4.³
2. Students had an average Rate of Improvement (ROI) of 1.0 or greater on their core AIMSweb assessment.⁴

Each of the four Reading Specialists who we identified for participation agreed to be interviewed. We conducted semi-structured interviews in December 2019 and January 2020. The interviews were transcribed and coded thematically. Interviews⁵ focused on the following topics:

- Prior experience
- Perception of roles and responsibilities
- Typical interactions with a student
- Areas of success and challenges
- Student selection
- Use of data, resources, and interventions
- Relationships and collaboration with other staff members

² For more details, please see a related Research Brief, titled: "Performance of K-3 Students who Received Support from a Reading Specialist in 2018-19" <https://www.philasd.org/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2020/01/Reading-Specialist-Student-Outcomes.pdf>.

³See Appendix A for the School District of Philadelphia's DRA-informed independent reading level minimum growth goals for grades K-3.

⁴See Appendix B for more about the aimsweb assessment and related data points, including ROI.

⁵ See Appendix C for the complete interview protocol.

Findings

We identified six practices described by Reading Specialists that may support positive outcomes for the students receiving their services.

Practice #1: Administrators recognize the expertise of Reading Specialists and provide Readings Specialists with the time, space, and resources to support students.

All of the Reading Specialists we interviewed described ways in which school leaders demonstrate respect for the expertise of Reading Specialists and provide Reading Specialists with what they need to effectively serve students. First, Reading Specialists reported that school leaders value their input in improving literacy. For example, one Reading Specialists explained her principal's reliance on her for ideas to improve school-wide reading:

The principal really wants to build up the independent reading levels and we all met together...and [the principal] was asking me, "what can we do?" I said, "We can start by leveling. We can make sure that all books are leveled in the school." And that's what you saw outside here.

Another Reading Specialist described similar reliance on her expertise:

I think [the principal] realizes that I'm the expert in the area... He's always willing to hear what you have to say... He's like, "what do you think? At the PD do you want to talk about it?" There's always opportunities for me to share.

Interview participants reported that principals also support their work by protecting their time and space, allowing them to do their jobs with minimal interference. One Reading Specialist commented, "*[The principal] allows you to be a professional. He allows you to come in and do your job.*" Principals also demonstrated respect for Reading Specialists' time by not asking them to cover classrooms or participate in tasks outside their official scope. For example, a participant explained, "*Maybe once in two years did I cover a classroom. [The principal] doesn't pull me to do anything. Literally, every day, I'm just following my schedule. I think that's the best support I can have.*"

Practice #2: Reading Specialists communicate and collaborate regularly with teachers and administrators.

Reading Specialists we interviewed described being in "constant communication" with their principals about supporting student progress. For example, one Reading Specialist described a common interaction with her principal: "*Sometimes [the principal] will just come in, pop in, and sit here and just [ask] 'How's it going? What do you need? Are there any materials you need?'*" Another Reading Specialist described turning to her principal as a thought partner: "*I really feel like I can talk to the principal here and really communicate. If I need something or something's not working...if I'm frustrated about something, I can talk about it and not hold it in.*"

Reading Specialists described a “constant flow” of communication with teachers regarding student needs and progress. Reading Specialists emphasized the desire to keep teachers informed about student progress. For example, one Reading Specialist described the practices she uses to ensure open communication with teachers:

I have a discussion with the teachers. I really want them to be part of this because they see the students every single day... I try my best to communicate, to show them how the students did. I sit in the hallway so if they're on a prep and they want to come see me do the DRA, I'm right there. I sit right outside the classrooms and I test the kids.

Reading Specialists also reported collaborating with teachers to support student learning. One Reading Specialist mentioned reinforcing literacy skills taught in the classroom saying “...with the teachers I have access to their lesson plans too on the Google Drive so I can see what their objective was for the week [the students and I] can touch on that as well.

Another Reading Specialist described conversations she had with a classroom teacher about ways in which students’ literacy skills could be reinforced during regular instruction:

After I do the DRA we talk about the reading behaviors and some things that they need to work on when they do their guided groups, when they're doing guided reading in the classroom or small group instruction.

Practice #3: Reading Specialists rely on guidance from principals, student data, and teacher input to identify students in need of services.

Reading Specialists noted the important role principals play in selecting students for a Reading Specialist’s caseload. One Reading Specialist mentioned her principal’s grade level approach: “[The principal] only wants me to work with second and third grade.” Another Reading Specialist discussed her principal’s needs-based approach: “We would usually meet and look at all the AIMSweb data first and decide which grade has the greatest need and then say, ‘OK, I want a lot of focus on second grade,’ that’s how we would do it.”

All Reading Specialists reported relying on student data to select their caseloads. One explained:

Once the teachers finish their AIMSweb, you look at the chart. Anybody who’s well below average, that’s who I pull out, I DRA them, assess them, and then we have a graph like, “here’s where they scored on AIMS web, here’s their DRA level, who would be good to group together?”

Interview participants discussed the importance of teacher input in finalizing their caseload. For example, one Reading Specialist commented, “[We] check in after I’m done testing and we’ll see, OK, does this make sense—the kids I’m taking?” Another Reading Specialist explained, “I use aimsweb and I correlate it with DRA data, but then I talk to the teachers.”

Practice #4: Reading Specialists use assessment data to design a customized, research-based approach to serving students.

Reading Specialists described the ways in which they use assessment data to inform intervention selection and design a customized, research-based approach to serving students. First, Reading Specialists reported using DRA, AIMSweb, and progress monitoring data to plan for instruction and identify possible interventions. One Reading Specialist reported, *"I'm looking at just their progress monitoring. Then, I try to target my plans."*

In addition to more formal assessments, Reading Specialists conducted their own informal monitoring using anecdotal notes, checklists, and word trackers. For example, one Reading Specialist explained, *"I'll, at least once a month, do my own monitoring, and I check where they are, and I circle what words they didn't know, and then that would help me plan for the following week."*

All Reading Specialists mentioned the ways in which they customize their approach to fit their students' needs and school contexts. For example, one Reading Specialist noted that rather than picking a single approach to intervention, *"...you need to pick and pull from what program you know is effective and works."* Another Reading Specialist discussed how she adjusts her approach to better fit her students' needs:

I'm doing a mishmash. The solid core of it is Wilson, but the problem with Wilson is that it takes a long time for each lesson and it takes about two years really to do Wilson, so I've cut some out and put Blend Phonics in which moves a lot faster.

Another Reading Specialist described using her own resources to supplement the research-based interventions:

I still have to weave in some of my own things because I feel like I can -- they don't have enough built-in...sight words or enough built-in maybe of a certain vowel. I'll stop for a week and do my own interventions again, like last year, then go back to it.

Most Reading Specialists used *Leveled Literacy Intervention* as their primary intervention, while others used *Wilson* or plan to use it in the future. Reading Specialists mentioned they supplemented their primary approach with other curricula and resources, including *ABC Boot Camp*, *Reading A-Z*, *Blend Phonics*, *Orton-Gillingham*, *Saxon Phonics*, *ReadyGEN*, *Reading First*, and *Words Their Way*.

Practice #5: Reading Specialists provide students with consistent and sustained intervention services.

Interview participants met with their groups for approximately 45 minutes per session at least three days per week. One Reading Specialist commented, *“Four times a week. That’s the minimum that I do. Sometimes I squeeze in more...”* Another Reading Specialist mentioned that sessions were closer to 30 minutes due to transition time:

It’s in my schedule for like 40 [minutes]– I follow the schedule at the school... the periods of the school. That has to include our transition times too, like I pick them up, come in, and then I bring them all back. But they’re not always in the same classroom so that could take five, 10 minutes.

These groupings were flexible and subject to change as needed based on progress monitoring. One Reading Specialist explained, *“I do that a lot through the year, switching based on their growth and conversations.”*

Practice #6: Reading Specialists develop systems and processes that lead to greater efficiency and maximize student learning time.

Reading Specialists described the ways they maximize student learning time by increasing efficiency. First, Reading Specialists reported having a consistent structure for small group sessions. One Reading Specialist commented:

I want to keep them on a routine, too. Like, “you know this is what we do, we come in,” whatever, sometimes it changes but pretty much it’s like they know what we’re doing when they come in here.

Another Reading Specialist emphasized the need to organize materials and plan interventions:

I would say that’s a key part. Really kind of having everything that you need to help them, you know, kind of doing the groundwork, so to speak. Having everything, laying the foundation, and then I think that will help your program be successful.

Conclusion

Reading Specialists whose students demonstrated relatively more progress than their peers shared several perceptions, approaches, and characteristics. First, they all expressed that they felt valued, well-supported, and recognized as professionals within their school environments. Interviews suggest that this may be foundational to Reading Specialists’ ability to work proactively and assert their expertise in a way that it is effectively integrated into classrooms and enhances the school’s approach to literacy as a whole.

Reading Specialists communicated during interviews that their positive relationships with school leaders and teachers was beneficial to their work, particularly when those relationships included input for student selection, frequent communication about student progress and shared resources. Again, by communicating and collaborating with teachers and administrators, Reading Specialists were able to ensure that appropriate students were receiving needed interventions and ideally allowing for the cohesion of services between the Reading Specialist and the classroom teacher.

Reading Specialists who we interviewed also emphasized the importance of using assessment data to inform student and intervention selection and reported that consistent and sustained intervention was valuable to student progress. They especially focused on the need to maintain regular and efficient group sessions and felt that the administration protected their time so that they could focus solely on serving students on their caseloads.

Finally, Reading Specialists also found LLI and Wilson to be beneficial interventions. Often they customized their approach to serving students by blending these research-based interventions with other interventions based on student needs.

Appendix A. More About Minimum Growth

We define **minimum growth** as the amount of growth a student should make in about one school year (or 7.5 months – September through June). These growth goals are not based on a student’s grade level, but on that student’s baseline (Q1) independent reading level. Every marking period, kindergarten through third-grade teachers assign students an independent reading level based on a combination of Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2) scores and other factors (such as observations, writing analyses, and running records). A K-3 student’s independent reading level represents the level of text complexity that he or she can read and understand without the help of an adult. We compare student independent reading levels from Quarter 1 (Q1) and Quarter 4 (Q4) to determine whether each student has made minimum growth.



Understanding Minimum Growth Goals Using Independent Reading Levels Grades K-3

School Year 2017-2018

Baseline Independent Reading Level Quarter 1	On Track to Goal Quarter 2	On Track to Goal Quarter 3	Growth Target Quarter 4
PR	A	B	C
A	A	B	C
B	C	D	E
C	D	E	F
D	E	F	I
E	F	H	I
F	I	I	J
G	I	J	K
H	J	J	K
I	J	K	L
J	K	L	L
K	L	L	M
L	M	N	O
M	N	O	O
N	O	P	P
O	P	P	Q
P	Q	Q	R
Q	R	R	S
R	S	S	T
S	T	T	U

Appendix B. More About AIMSweb

SDP uses AIMSweb, a universal early literacy screening, benchmarking, and progress-monitoring tool from Pearson, to assess literacy proficiency in SDP for all K-5 students. In grades K-3, teachers score students' performance on each AIMSweb assessment according to the number of cues students correctly identify in a 60-second period. Each grade level is administered one core assessment (in addition to other standardized measures) each fall, winter, and spring. To identify participants for our study, we looked the average Rate of Improvement (ROI) of the students receiving services from a reading specialist on the following assessments:

- The kindergarten **Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) assessment**, which measures letter identification;
- The first-grade **Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) assessment**, which measures phonemic awareness;
- The second- and third-grade **Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) assessment**, which measures oral reading fluency.

We chose to use average **Rate of Improvement (ROI)** as the metric to identify possible participants because this data point tells us the average number of points a student or group of students increased per week between assessment periods [i.e., (fall correct-spring correct)/number of weeks].

Appendix C. Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself and your teaching background.
 - a. How long have you been teaching in total? In SDP?
 - b. How long have you been a reading specialist?
 - c. How long have you worked at [SCHOOL NAME]?

2. Can you tell me about your role as a reading specialist?
 - a. How would you describe your responsibilities?
 - b. What's a typical day like for you?
 - i. How many students do you see?
 - ii. Where do you work with students?
 - iii. Small group? One-on-one?

3. What do you like most about being a reading specialist?

4. What are the primary challenges to your work?

5. The students who were on your caseload last year made large gains relative to other student who saw reading specialist. We are really here to learn more about to what practices you attribute those gains. Can you start by telling me why you think the students who you saw made so much growth?
 - a. Student selection:
 - i. How do you select students for services?
 - ii. How do you decide when to exit students?
 - iii. Do you attribute anything about that process to student literacy gains?

 - b. Selection and use of interventions
 - i. What types of interventions do you use with your students?
 - ii. How do you select the interventions?
 - iii. Do you attribute the use of any particular intervention to student literacy gains?

 - c. Use of data and assessments
 - i. What types of assessments or data do you collect on your students?
 - ii. How do you use the data to inform your work?
 - iii. Do you attribute anything about your use of assessment or data to student literacy gains?

 - d. Teacher collaboration
 - i. Can you describe the ways in which you collaborate with teachers or other school staff members?
 - ii. Is there anything about these collaboration to which you attribute student literacy growth?

- e. Principal/Administrative support
 - i. Can you describe the ways in which the school administration supports your work?
 - ii. Is there anything about this support to which you attribute student literacy growth?

- f. What else do you want to tell me that might help other reading specialists see the same type of growth that was demonstrated by students on your caseload?