



Findings from the 2019-20 End-of-Year Reading Specialists Survey

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Key Findings

- Reading Specialists reported having a **clear understanding of their students' needs** and felt prepared to meet those needs.
- Reading Specialists reported having a **positive, collaborative relationship** with teachers, principals, and Early Literacy Specialists.
- Reading Specialists reported **high levels of confidence** in their ability to support student learning.
- The Covid-19 pandemic presented unique challenges to Reading Specialists, including difficulty **tracking performance, navigating online resources, and maintaining student engagement.**

Introduction

In 2019-20, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) placed certified Reading Specialists in 38 schools. Reading Specialists were primarily responsible for providing additional support to K-3 students reading significantly below grade level. Reading Specialists taught daily, specially designed, small-group lessons to address student deficiencies in reading, writing, phonics, and word study.

In spring 2020, the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) administered an end-of-year survey to the 38 Reading Specialists. ORE received 34 completed surveys (a response rate of 89%), and the surveys included 268 open-ended comments.

The first section of the survey asked Reading Specialists to evaluate their in-school experiences *prior* to the transition to digital learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the questions related to:

- 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.

The second section asked Reading Specialists to describe how the shift to online learning during Covid-19 had affected their ability to support student learning. Specifically, the questions related to:

- How they served students in the online learning environment;
- Which interventions, strategies, and activities they found helpful; and
- Challenges they experienced.

Findings

Section 1: In-School Services

Most responding Reading Specialists were able to meet with every one of their students at least once per week.

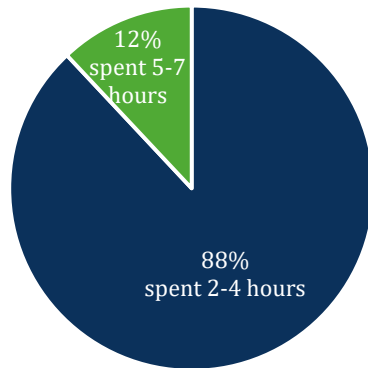
The majority of Reading Specialists (53%) reported serving an average of 31-40 students at their school (Table 1). One-fourth (24%) of Reading Specialists reported serving an average of 21-30 students at their school.

Table 1. Average number of students seen weekly by Reading Specialists (n=34)

| Average Number of Students Seen Weekly | Percentage of Respondents |
|--|---------------------------|
| 21 to 30 | 24% |
| 31 to 40 | 53% |
| 41 to 50 | 6% |
| 51+ | 15% |

Most Reading Specialists (88%) spent 2-4 hours with students each week. The remainder (12%) reported spending between 5-7 hours with students each week (Figure 1).

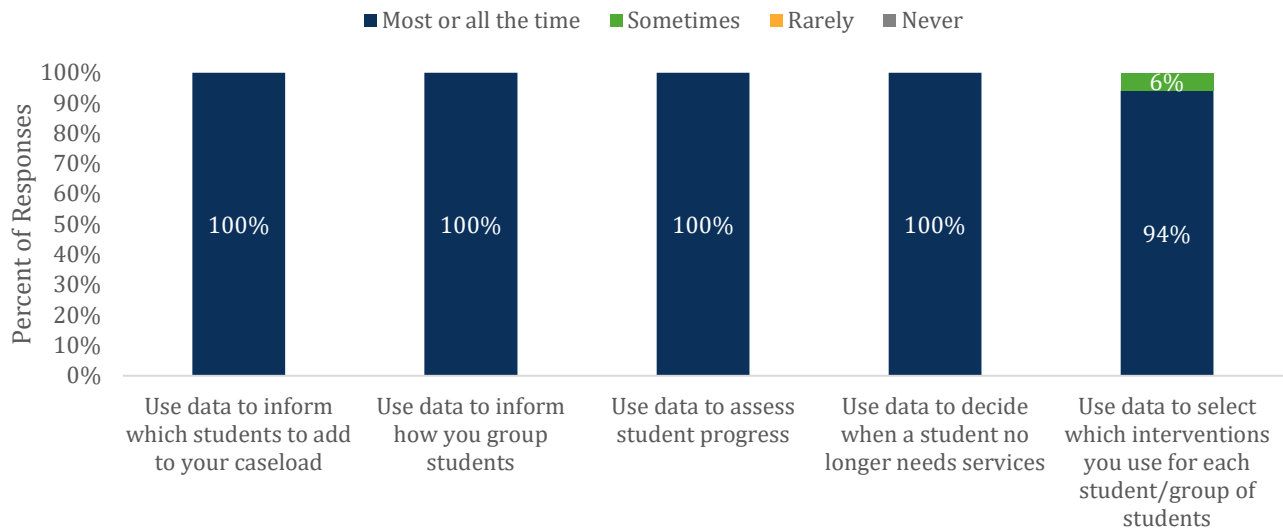
Figure 1. Average hours Reading Specialists spent with students per week (n=34)



Responding Reading Specialists reported making data-informed decisions and using research-based interventions with students.

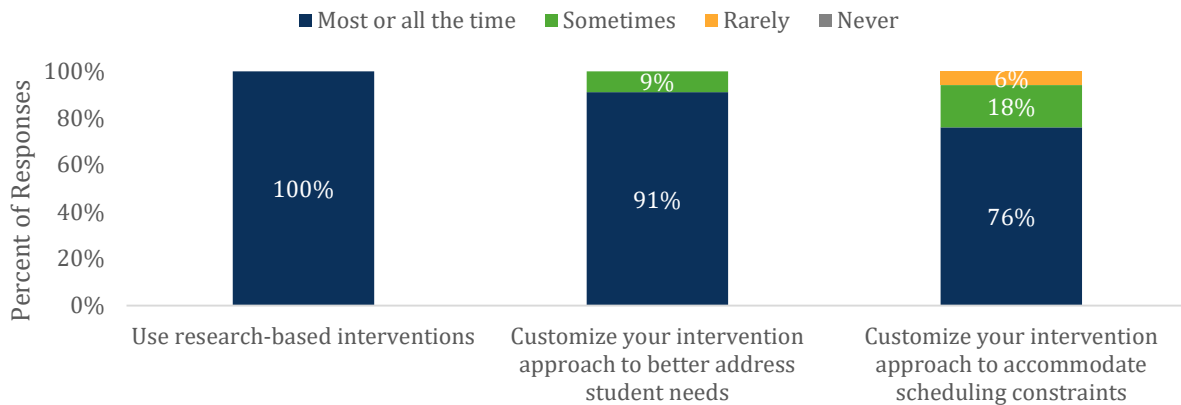
All respondents reported using data “most or all of the time” to guide their decisions around adding students to their caseload, grouping students, assessing student progress, and exiting students from Reading Specialists services (Figure 2). About 94% of respondents reported using data “most or all of the time” to select which interventions to use with students.

Figure 2. Reading Specialists reported using data to inform decisions and assess student progress (n=34)



All respondents reported using research-based interventions with students and 91% reported customizing those interventions to better address student needs “most or all of the time” (Figure 3). Only 76% of respondents reported customizing interventions to accommodate scheduling constraints.

Figure 3. Reading Specialists reported using research-based interventions and having a clear understanding of their students’ needs (n=34)



All respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they have a clear understanding of their students’ needs. All respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they have control over their instructional methods and feel prepared to meet the needs of their students (Figure 4). Of respondents who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they had a clear understanding of their students’ needs, five provided open-ended responses. These respondents valued their autonomy to assess each student’s needs and to develop instructional tools. One respondent commented:

I'm fortunate that administration allows me to use methods that I deem effective for my students. I definitely feel responsible for improving their literacy by motivating students to attend school regularly and emphasizing the importance of reading.

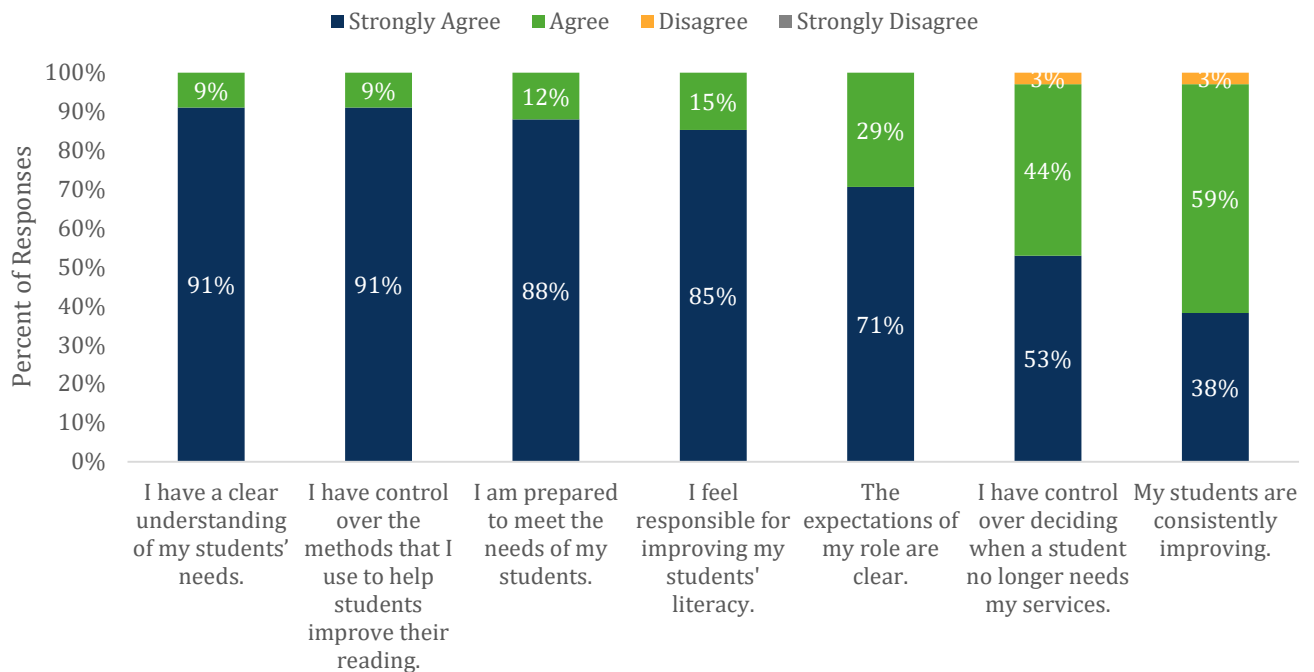
Only 3% of respondents believed that they did not have control over deciding when a student no longer needs services or that their students were constantly improving throughout the year (Figure 4). One respondent “disagreed” that they have control over deciding when a student no longer needs services and explained:

Not everyone understands students may exit the program. It needs to be communicated, to all parties, that when students no longer need the service because they have either met, or exceeded their goals, they may exit, and make room for others who [need] the intervention.

The respondent who “disagreed” that their students are constantly improving noted that frequent absenteeism is an impediment to their students’ improvement:

Unfortunately, some of my students have chronic attendance issues and some have unidentified learning differences, both of which make it challenging for them to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Figure 4. Reading Specialists reported having a clear understanding of their students’ needs (n=34)



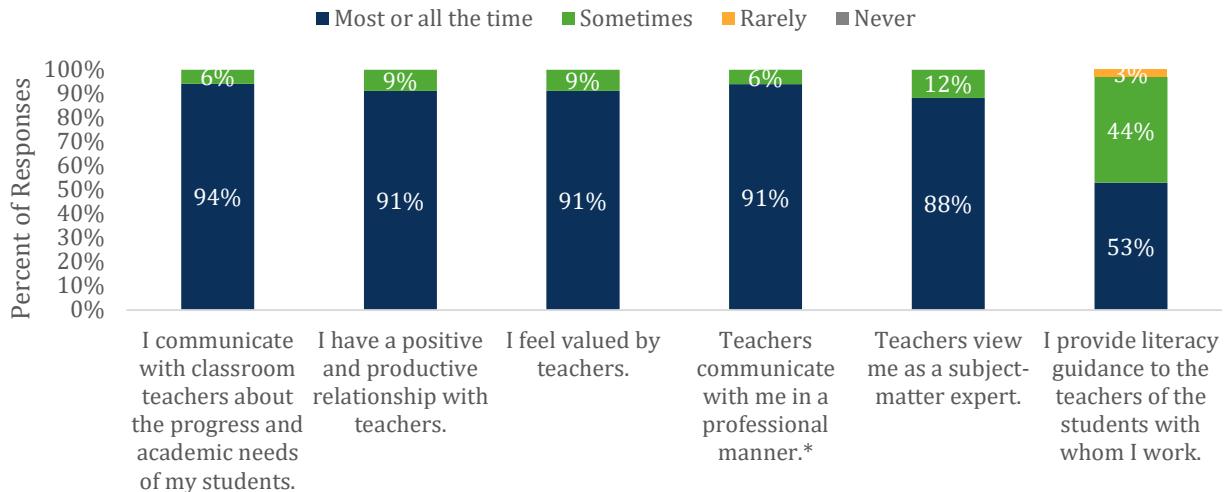
Responding Reading Specialists reported having a positive and professional relationship with teachers, principals, and ELS coaches.

Relationship with Teachers

Most respondents (91%) reported that they have positive communication and collaboration with teachers and feel valued and appreciated as experts (Figure 5). Only 3% of respondents “rarely” provided literacy guidance to their students’ teachers. Of these respondents, one provided more detail in open-ended comments:

The coaches and CLI staff usually provide literacy guidance to the teachers of the students with whom I work. I am rarely asked to do so.

Figure 5. Reading Specialists reported communicating and having a positive relationship with the teacher (n=34)



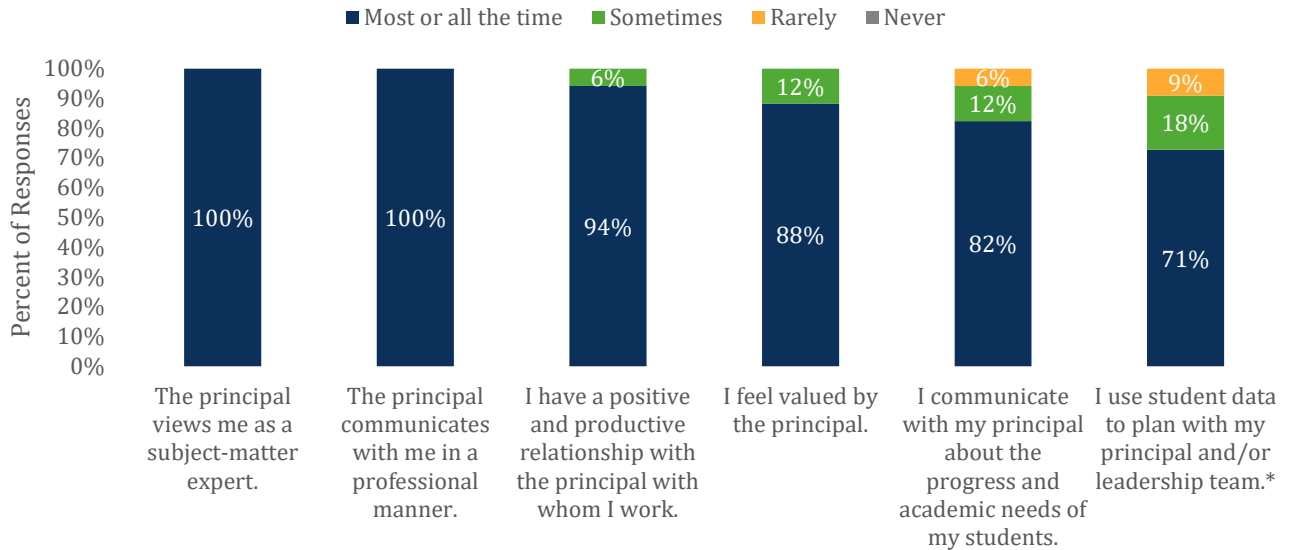
*Only 33 Reading Specialists provided a response to this statement.

Relationship with Principals

All responding Reading Specialists reported positive communication and collaboration with principals. All respondents reported that their principal viewed them as a subject-matter expert and communicated with them in a professional manner (Figure 6). Most respondents (94%) reported that they had a positive and productive relationship with their principal “most or all the time.” Only one respondent reported “rarely” using student data to plan with their principal and explained in an open-ended comment:

Our school did not have data meetings or grade group meetings most of the year due to lost preps and teacher coverages.

Figure 6. Reading Specialists reported having a positive, professional relationship with their principal (n=34)

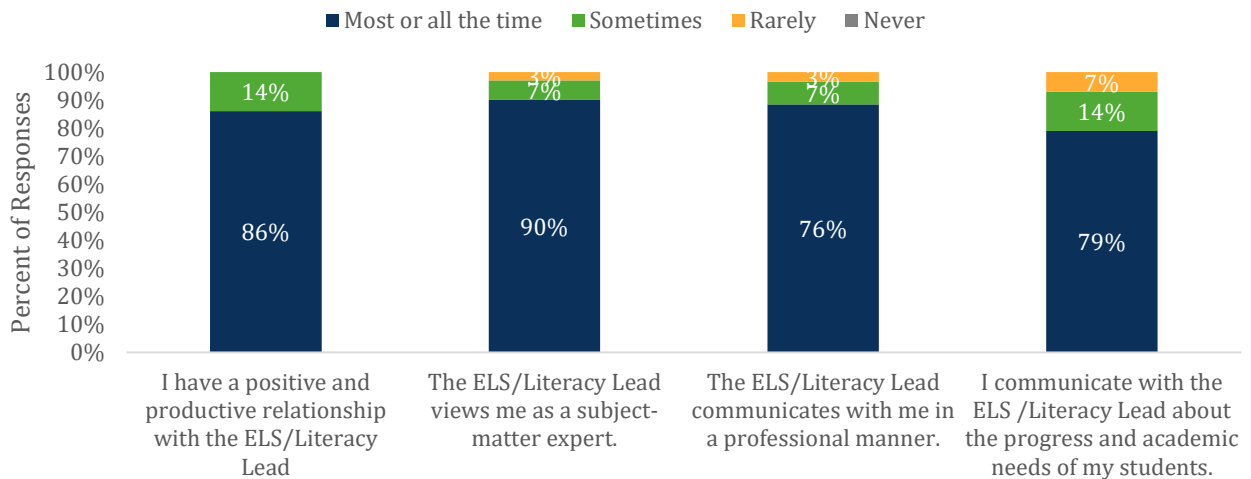


*Only 33 Reading Specialists provided a response to this statement.

Relationship with ELS coaches

Approximately 86% of Reading Specialists reported having a positive and productive relationship with Early Literacy Specialists (or ELS coaches) and Literacy Leads (LLs), and 90% reported that ELS/Literacy Lead coaches viewed them as a subject-matter expert (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Reading Specialists reported having a positive and productive relationship with Early Literacy Specialists and Literacy Leads (n=29)

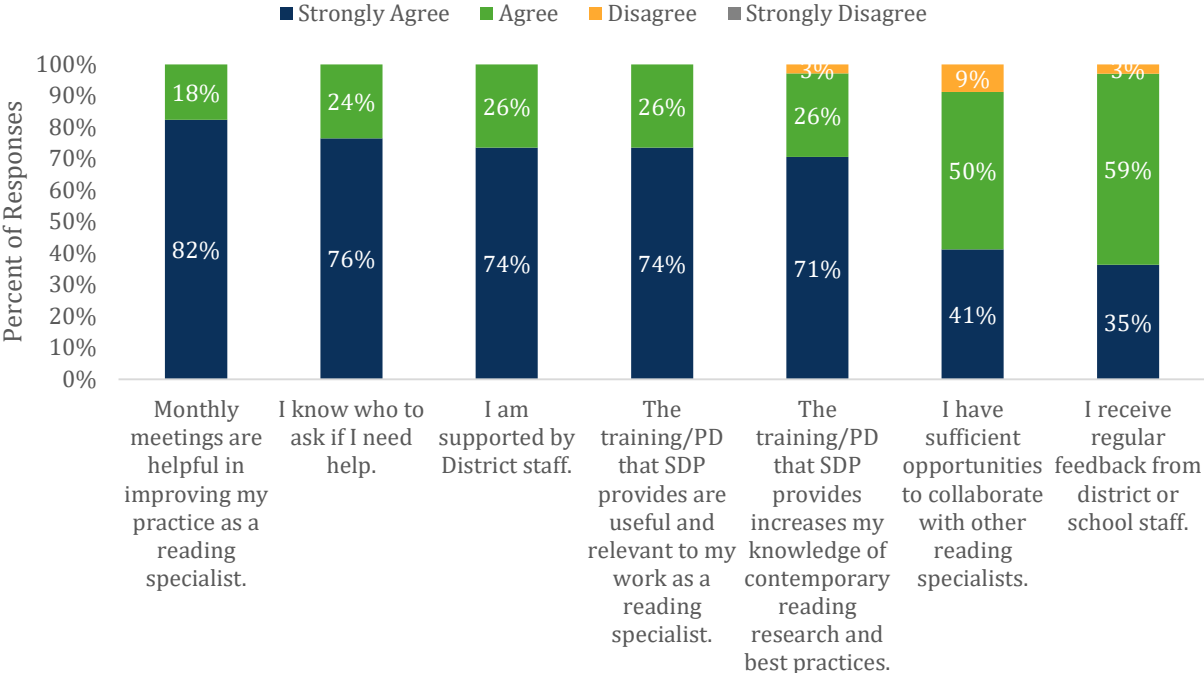


Responding Reading Specialists were satisfied with District support and professional development opportunities, but some desired more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and other professionals.

Although all respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that monthly meetings were helpful, they know who to ask for help, and they feel supported by District staff, three respondents (9%) reported that they did not have a sufficient amount of time to collaborate with other Reading Specialists (Figure 8). One of the respondents who disagreed commented:

I would like to have more opportunity for informal discussion and collaboration with my Reading Specialist colleagues regarding teaching procedures and strategies used in our classrooms.

Figure 8. Reading Specialists reported having sufficient District support (n=34)



*Only 33 Reading Specialists provided a response to this statement.

Responding Reading Specialists reported some challenges with school or classroom schedules.

About one-fifth (21%) of respondents reported that issues with school or classroom schedules presented “a great challenge” or “a moderate challenge” to their work (Figure 9). Additionally, 15% reported that the lack of sufficient space to meet with students was a “a

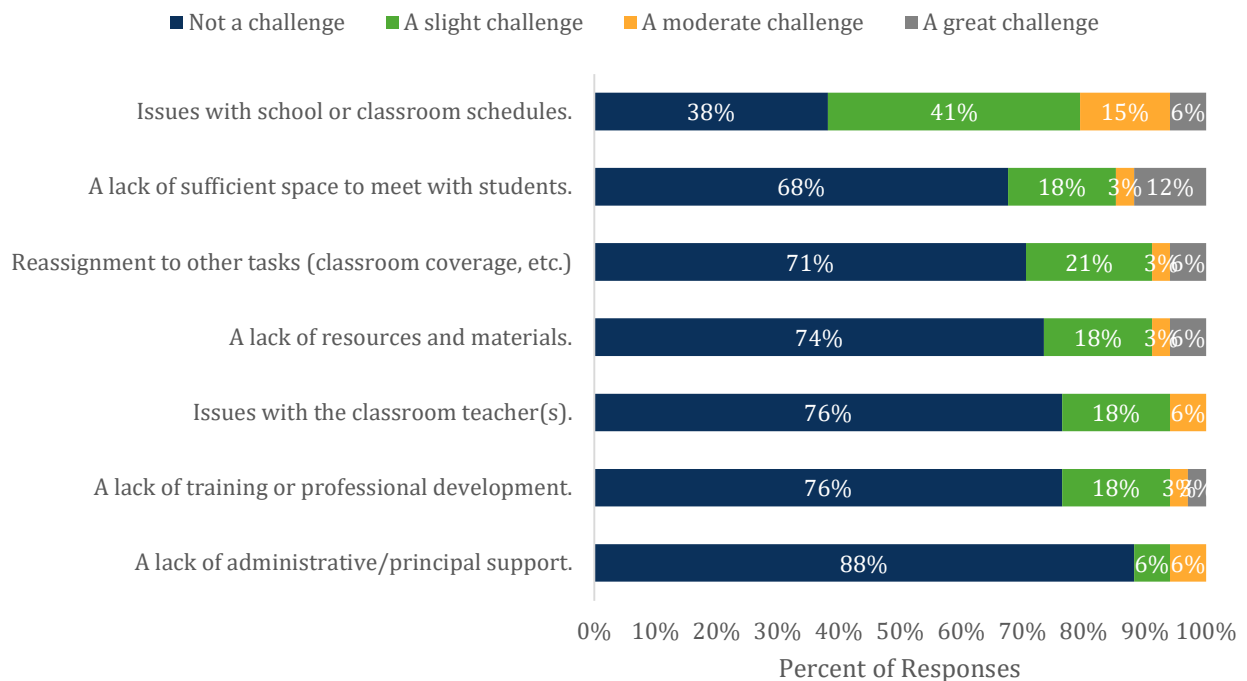
great challenge” or “a moderate challenge.” Of these respondents, three offered more detail in open-ended comments. One Reading Specialist said:

I am located in the library. I have a small corner of the room to take my intervention students. The library is often filled with various groups of students as well as the librarians (WEPAC). I am often asked to quiet down my voice when I am teaching. Also, if I request a choral response from my students, they are asked to quiet down as well. I am passionate about my teaching and find it challenging to keep my instruction to such a quiet level. Schedules create a challenge because it is difficult to find times for intervention groups that do not interfere with classroom instruction.

Another Reading Specialist commented:

This was the second year I worked in the hallway for lack of classroom space. It is very hard to keep students focused. Working in the hallway increases distractions twofold. Moreover, I constantly have material go missing since it is in the hallway.

Figure 9. Reading Specialists reported that school/classroom schedules presented a challenge to their work (n=34)



Responding Reading Specialists reported that frequent student absences presented a challenge to their work.

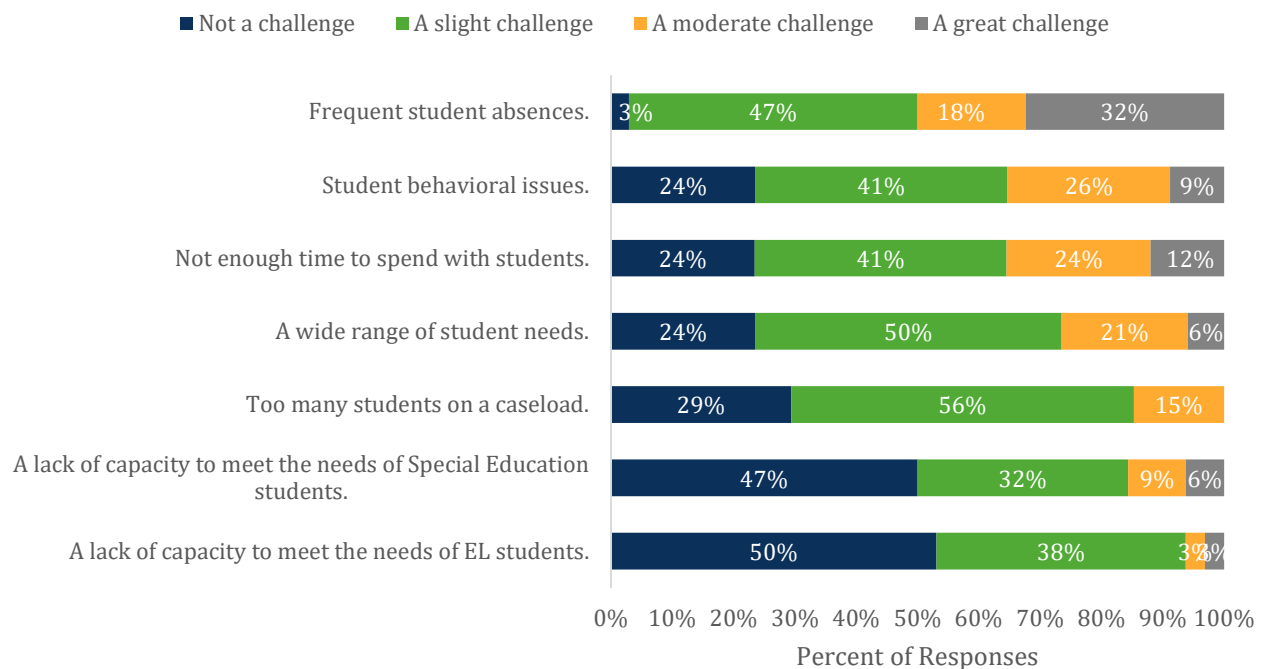
One-third (32%) of Reading Specialists reported that frequent student absences posed “a great challenge” to their work (Figure 10). About three-quarters of respondents reported that student behavior issues, not having enough time to meet with students, and addressing a wide range of student needs could be challenging. Of these respondents, five provided an open-ended response. One Reading Specialist commented:

Students who require intensive intervention and who have poor attendance cause a great challenge because those students especially require consistency and routines.

Another Reading Specialist described how students’ behavior issues affect their work:

Behavior issues have a particularly negative impact since I only see groups for a short period of time, and I am unable to make up for lost instructional at another point in the day.

Figure 10. Reading Specialists reported student absences presented a challenge to their work (n=34)

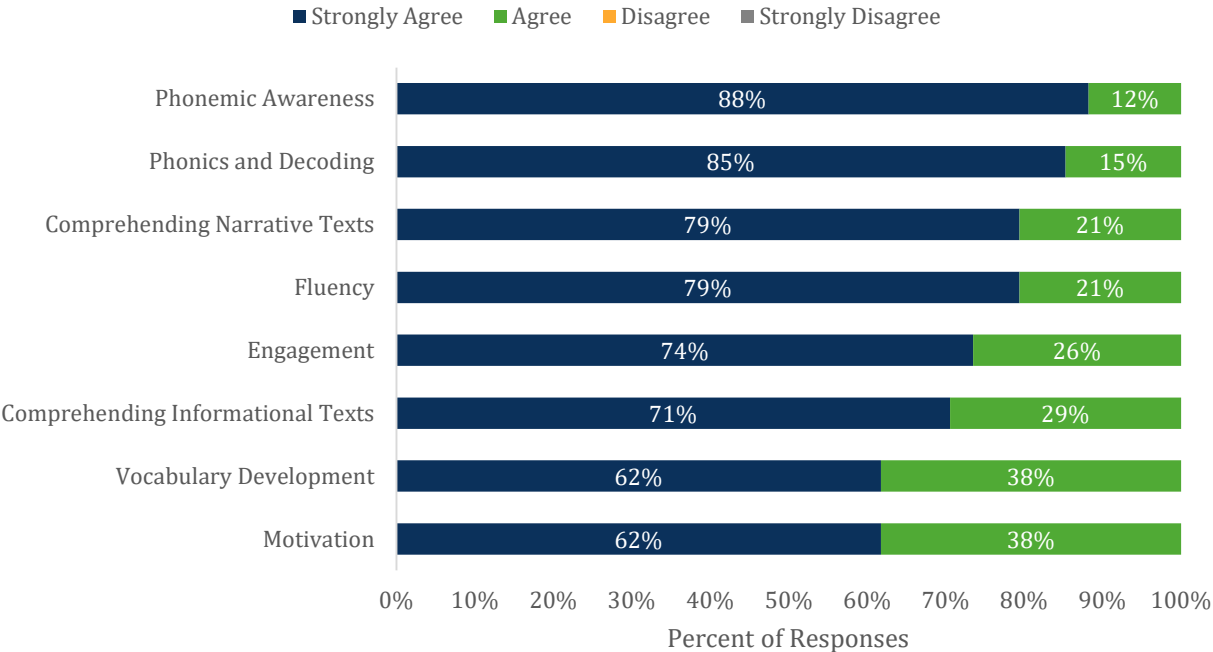


All responding Reading Specialists expressed some degree of confidence in their ability to support students in various areas of literacy development.

The survey asked Reading Specialists to report their level of confidence in supporting students in various areas, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and comprehending informational texts. All respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that 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 and Phonics and Decoding, with 88% and 85% “strongly agreeing,” respectively.

When asked about specific areas in which they would like additional training and support, five Readings Specialists provided open-end comments. These responses included requests for digital access to LLI materials, professional development opportunities on extending comprehension, and additional training working with English Learners students.

Figure 11. I am confident in my ability to support students in the following areas:



Section 2: Online Learning

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SDP transitioned to digital learning on March 16, 2020. This sudden switch challenged Reading Specialists to find new and innovative ways to deliver online instruction while remaining responsive to each student's unique learning style. The second part of the survey asked respondents to provide open-ended responses to a variety of questions about how their role has been affected by the switch to online learning.

Responding Reading Specialists utilized Google Meets and Google Classroom to meet with students.

When asked about the ways in which they are currently serving their students, 24 of the 34 responding Reading Specialists (71%) responded that they used Google Meet or Google Classroom to deliver online instruction. To supplement their teaching, many Reading Specialists used digital books, instructional videos, and songs. For example, one Reading Specialist described how their instructional methods have changed to accommodate online learning:

I am currently using digital LLI books, my own materials, and Epic Books to provide support for my students. I have a daily 30-minute session, per grade level, K, 1, 2, & 3, during which I conduct a reading lesson, which involves the 5 areas of Reading. Then, I am available for another hour per day. On my own time (late at nights), I design my own Google slides to accompany read-alouds that I post for them to work on, if they are unable to join my Google Meets sessions.

Another Reading Specialist described their experience finding innovative ways to deliver online instruction:

Live meets for my case load three times a week with the option for students to complete the work independently. The use of office hours to meet for smaller group instruction for students who cannot attend live meet. I conduct three live meets a week at Lunch time for all students K-2 in order to develop engagement and a sense of community during this distance learning. The platform is Book Club, Read Aloud, and Sing Along all based in best practices. I have assigned Study Island and Raz Kids to all my students so they can work independently in a diagnostic prescriptive online program.

Reading Specialists utilized a wide range of interventions, strategies, and activities to serve their students during digital learning.

When asked about which interventions, strategies, and activities they used during digital learning, 34 Reading Specialists provided an open-ended response. Over 23 respondents (68%) mentioned using one or more online resources, including Screencastify, Foundations, YouTube, Wilson services, or Reading A-Z. One Reading Specialist used of a combination of these resources:

I am using a wide range of interventions including screencasts, Youtube lessons, slide presentations, google forms and worksheets, daily face to face lessons, virtual field trips, Vooks, Learning A-Z, Haggerty Phonemic Awareness, LLI and any resource I feel will capture the interest off my students.

Another Reading Specialist described a similar experience:

I continued using Foundations. I use the strategies and activities from the teacher's guide. I use Wilson online, YouTube, and teachers pay teachers to supplement. I also post support lessons to help my students understand a skill/strategy that their teacher is currently teaching if they are having a problem. Wilson online has been a huge help, and so has Epic!

Responding Reading Specialists found it difficult to track student progress in the online learning environment.

When asked how they are tracking student progress, seven of the 34 responding Reading Specialists (21%) mentioned that online learning has complicated their ability to track student progress. One Reading Specialist commented on tracking student progress online:

This I find a challenge. I track participation and attendance. How many assignments they turn in and the quality and correctness of the assignments.

Another Reading Specialist described how they overcame this challenge:

I track progress through observations during my live google meet lessons. I always have a part of the lesson where students need to independently complete a task (i.e. read decodable words or phrases, identify phonics concepts, read sight words, etc.). I also assigning weekly quizzes (on google forms), although many students have an adult helping them with their assignments, so it is not a true measure of their independent abilities.

Although tracking students has proved to be difficult, Reading Specialists are doing their best to take anecdotal notes and utilize online services to ensure that their students remain on track.

Some challenges Reading Specialists faced in the online environment included infrequent attendance, technical/internet issues, and student participation.

When asked about challenges they faced in an online environment, 13 of the 34 responding Reading Specialists (38%) noted that student attendance remained a significant challenge. One Reading Specialist described how difficult it was to reach students who don't attend Google Meets:

Not every student that was on my caseload before covid attends live google meetings. It is a challenge to reach the students and to keep them on track with progressing for the new school year.

The switch to online learning has also been accompanied by technical/internet issues. Six responding Reading Specialists (18%) reported technological challenges. One Reading Specialist described their adjustment to online learning resources:

The learning curve was great adjusting to online instruction. Learning google classroom etc. was time consuming but extremely worthwhile.

Other challenges included internet connection issues, lack of communication, and too much background noise during live meetings.

Reading Specialists offered suggestions to schools that do not have Reading Specialists.

When asked to offer suggestions to schools who do not have Reading Specialists but are still working to support their readers through online learning, nine of the 33 responding of Reading Specialists (28%) suggested that schools utilize online resources like Raz Kids or Readworks. One of these Reading Specialists commented:

Use Capstone Library, Readworks or some other resource to encourage students to read daily. Address comprehension skills by using graphic organizers. Review sight words and key vocabulary.

Other Reading Specialists stressed the importance of encouraging students to read every day and instruct them at their own level. One Reading Specialist commented on the importance of reading:

One of the best ways to build reading stamina is to read, read, read. The schools that do not have Reading Specialists should engage both parents and students with online reading, such as Epic Books or the digital version of their reading series.

Reading Specialists asked for additional technology support and strategies to get students more involved.

When asked about what types of supports, resources, or guidance Reading Specialists need to assist online learning, ten out of the 33 responding Reading Specialists (30%) reported wanting additional technology training or more access to online resources. One Reading Specialist wrote:

It would be really helpful to have an online leveled text collection with teacher guide that is available and in full use for the Reading Specialists to dig into. It really takes more time out to recreate the book digitally and add sound in order to present it to our students.

Since student attendance and participation continues to be a problem for online learning, some Reading Specialists asked for more strategies to engage students.

Despite the difficulties of Covid-19, Reading Specialists continue to love and value their work.

For the last part of the survey, Reading Specialists were asked to provide any additional feedback and information regarding the online learning environment. Of the 20 Reading Specialists who provided feedback, 17 respondents (85%) had positive feedback. Many Reading Specialists commented that they loved their jobs and valued the work they do:

I feel valued by the majority of my colleagues, by my administrators, and most especially by my students. I feel that my impact on student achievement has been great.

My experience as a Reading Specialists in this program has been excellent. I have the support I need from my district supervisor, principal, teachers, parents, and students. I have been teaching for over fifty years and this experience has been both rewarding

and life-changing. I hope every teacher has an opportunity to experience the same satisfaction that I have experienced from this program.

It is extremely rewarding to directly address the needs of our students in such a supported group. I am most grateful for all the efforts rendered to allow us to teach the struggling students in a productive way.

I have had a wonderful experience as a Reading Specialist at my school. Nothing is better than watching a child become more confident in their reading and growing towards proficiency.

Summary

In spring 2020, ORE administered an end-of-year survey to 38 Reading Specialists, and 89% completed the survey. Over half (53%) of responding Reading Specialists reported working with 31-40 students on average a week. The majority (88%) of Reading Specialists reported spending an average of 2-4 hours with students per week.

Reading Specialists reported having a positive relationship with teachers, principals, and ELS coaches “most or all of the time” (94%, 94%, and 86%, respectively). Reading Specialists said they communicated less frequently with ELS coaches about student progress and academic needs (79%) than with teachers (94%) and principals (82%).

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 they serve. Absences and behavior issues were some of the biggest challenges; Reading Specialists indicated these were a “great” or “moderate” challenge (50% and 35%, respectively). In some cases, there may be too many students on a Reading Specialist’s caseload.

Reading Specialists reported high levels of confidence in supporting students in all areas of literacy development. All Reading Specialists either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they were confident in their abilities to support student in Phonemic Awareness, Phonics and Decoding, and Fluency. All Reading Specialists reported high levels of confidence engaging and motivating students, as well.

When asked about how they adapted to the switch to online learning, most (71%) Reading Specialists reported utilizing Google Classroom and Google Meet to serve their students, and over 68% reported utilizing additional online learning resources like Screencastify,

Fundations, YouTube, Wilson services, or Reading A-Z. However, online learning has produced challenges for Reading Specialists as well. Over 21% of Reading Specialists expressed difficulty tracking student progress online, and 38% reported that student attendance remains a significant challenge. When asked about suggestions for schools who do not have Reading Specialists, 28% of responding Reading Specialists said that these schools should utilize online resources and ensure that their students are reading every day. Finally, 30% of the Reading Specialists said they would have benefited from more technology training or more support in enhancing student engagement.

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