SUPPORTING EARLY READERS

A Scan of K-3 Literacy Practices in Philadelphia Charter Schools

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Supporting Early Readers:
A Scan of K-3 Literacy Practices in Philadelphia Charter Schools

Rachel Comly, Ryan Fink, Monica Mielke, and Adrianne Flack • July 2018

Summary

In Philadelphia, civic and education leaders have identified early literacy programming as critical for overall education improvement. Charter schools enroll about one third of all public school students in Philadelphia. **This study seeks to understand how Philadelphia charter schools support their early readers and writers, in order to contribute to knowledge-sharing across schools and identify areas for investment.**

Researchers invited Philadelphia charter schools and charter management organizations serving kindergarten to third grade students to identify a single representative to participate in a 30-minute interview. We interviewed 38 school representatives and charter management organization (CMO) leaders about K-3 literacy practices in their school(s). We asked these school representatives to describe their literacy programming, the strengths and challenges of their chosen program, and the additional resources that would most help their school's literacy program. These representatives may not have listed all of their literacy practices within the interviews, and the interviews do not provide full evidence of the practices as they are implemented. However, findings from these interviews provide a view of the landscape of early literacy instructional practices in Philadelphia charter schools.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND: THE BIG PICTURE

- **Philadelphia charter schools report a broadly similar set of approaches to early literacy programming.** Most respondents reported that their programs reflect research-based best practices in early literacy: programs address multiple key elements of literacy instruction across individual, small-group, and whole-group settings; schools build and implement a tiered intervention system for students who struggle; schools engage with students' families to connect programming to students' lives outside of school; and schools providing training and support for teachers.

- **Charter schools identified staff capacity for high-quality early literacy instruction as a key lever for improvement.** Respondents pointed to staff capacity as an integral component for implementation of a strong early literacy program at their school. Staff capacity refers to schools working to deepen the skills of existing teachers and hiring additional staff to support early literacy. Some respondents identified increasing staff capacity as a key challenge facing their school's early literacy program; others called their investments to support staff capacity a strength of their program.

- **Despite consistency in broad approaches to literacy, charter schools varied widely in their specific resources and strategies**. Representatives described variation in their literacy programs' focus and emphases, the training and supports available for teachers, and the roles and responsibilities of staff supporting their literacy programs.

- **Certain elements of early literacy programming are both strengths of and challenges for charter schools.** Each charter school representative identified strengths in their school's literacy practices. Some schools' areas of strength complemented other schools' identified areas for growth. Strengths and challenges are highlighted throughout the report.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- **Charter schools share a vision of best practices and, because of their identified strengths and common challenges, may benefit from knowledge-sharing.** All schools, whether operating independently or as a part of a network, may have much to gain by looking to one another for solutions to common challenges. The groundwork for this strategic collaboration may already be in place.

- **Charter school leaders could convene to explore a range of opportunities for supporting and strengthening early literacy programs.** The opportunity for knowledge-sharing identified in this study suggests several possible options, including creating a professional learning network or developing a workshop series based on schools' identified needs. Local organizations, such as Philadelphia School Partnership (PSP) and Philadelphia Charters for Excellence (PCE), that have served as conveners within the charter sector, might provide a venue for schools to learn from one another.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND: THE DETAILS

- **Schools' overall instructional approaches aligned with best practices: most schools focused on multiple key areas of literacy development in different instructional settings. Particular strategies and emphases, however, varied across schools.** Small-group instruction, specifically in the form of guided reading, is a central element of most schools' instructional practices. Some schools said that using small-group instruction to tailor supports for students is a strength of their literacy programming, while other schools want to improve in this area. Schools could share successful strategies related to planning and leading guided reading groups and small-group instruction, which could enhance literacy instructional practices across the sector.

- **Although almost all respondents reported that students have access to books through classroom libraries, they reported mixed levels of satisfaction about text selection and variety.** Almost half of respondents said that teachers were responsible for building their own classroom libraries. Half of respondents said they needed more books, including books of different levels and genres. Four respondents said student access to books was a strength of their literacy program, while five said it was a challenge to maintain the quantity and quality of books necessary to support their students.

- **Most school representatives reported using assessments to track students' reading levels.** A small number of school representatives reported that the way they assess students and use assessment data was a strength; this could be an opportunity for schools that do not yet use formative assessment strategies to learn from the successes of other charter schools.

- **Respondents most commonly reported using in-class strategies, such as small-group instruction and guided reading, to support struggling readers.** Some schools described a tiered intervention system. A few school representatives reported that it is challenging to

meet the needs of all students, and those schools might learn from school representatives who reported that tailored student supports are a strength of their program.

- **No respondents named supporting English learners (ELs) as a strength of their school's literacy program; two schools cited this as a particular challenge.** Our interviews did not focus on how schools support their English learners, but some respondents described related strengths or challenges. One-fifth of school representatives reported having EL specialist teachers or coordinators. In addition, dual language schools in the Philadelphia charter sector conduct literacy instruction in two languages; these programs serve both ELs and students whose first language is English.

- **In order to connect literacy to students' lives outside of school, schools employed one or more of the following strategies: culturally responsive instructional materials and activities, family engagement, staff training, summer support, and reading beyond the school context.** Almost half of respondents said their schools actively work to develop teachers' cultural responsiveness. Connecting with students' families is a particular challenge for a few schools. Schools could consider adopting additional strategies in order to help make literacy relevant for students and to connect with students' families.

- **Some respondents said that their support staff were strengths of their literacy program, while other schools expressed the need for more support staff, especially to provide support to struggling readers.** Schools could share practices for employing and retaining early literacy classroom teachers and support staff.

- **Most respondents described coaching as an integral component of teacher development, and many schools also used other strategies such as school-provided professional development and teacher collaboration.** Descriptions of these supports varied across schools, and some school representatives reported that these were areas in which their schools could grow. Schools could learn from each other's practices to support teachers.

- **Respondents described additional resources that would support their early literacy programming, including more staff, training, and books.** Most commonly, respondents requested staffing resources, particularly reading specialists, to provide literacy interventions with students. School representatives also said that additional instructional staff would reduce class size and/or make small-group instruction more feasible. Respondents described needing training around specific aspects of literacy instruction, more resources to train and support teacher instruction within schools, and more resources to pay for external professional development. Most respondents also reported needing more, better quality books, on a greater variety of topics.

Table of Contents

Why this study

In Philadelphia, civic and education leaders have identified early literacy programming as critical for overall education improvement. Children who read on grade level by the end of third grade are more likely to graduate high school (The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, 2018). Students who do not reach grade-level proficiency in reading in the earliest grades typically struggle to catch up, and many never do (Juel, 1988; Snow et al., 1991; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). But in 2017, 60 percent of fourth graders in Philadelphia's non-charter public schools scored Below Basic in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), placing Philadelphia below 14 other participating cities and only ahead of Detroit (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). (Charter schools are not included in this NAEP data.) In 2016-17, 30 percent of fourth graders attending Philadelphia's non-charter schools and 17 percent of those attending charter schools scored Below Basic in English/Language Arts on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

Becoming a proficient reader and writer does not happen automatically. Learning to read and write is a complex process, one that is best supported in early childhood by literacy exposure at home and targeted classroom instruction that cultivates independence (Ehri, 2005; Ouellette & Beers, 2010; Hudson et al., 2008; van Bergen et al., 2017; Shahaeian et al., 2018).

The sheer size of the city's charter school sector, which currently enrolls about one-third of all public school students, positions it as a key agent for improving early literacy in Philadelphia. The flexibility inherent in the charter sector offers opportunities for these schools to develop and test the effectiveness of new approaches to old problems. At the same time, the large number of individual schools and networks makes it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the sector's approaches to early literacy development. Research about strategies used by charter schools to provide instruction, engage families, and support struggling learners could contribute to knowledge-sharing and problem-solving across schools, identify common areas of need, and suggest areas for additional private and public investment. This report does not address early literacy practices in Philadelphia's non-charter public schools.

The purpose of this study is to fill this knowledge gap about how Philadelphia's charter schools approach literacy programming in kindergarten through third grade. The study is informed by a large body of research on literacy development in the early elementary years and takes a pragmatic, improvement-oriented approach to the question of how Philadelphia can best support all of its public school students to become capable readers and writers.

What the study examined

The study is a first attempt to map the landscape of charter schools' approaches to early literacy programming, including their classroom instructional strategies, teacher training and collaboration, family engagement strategies, and targeted interventions for struggling readers.

We invited each of the 64 Philadelphia charter schools serving K-3 students to participate in the study. In interviews, we focused on the instructional practices that charter schools employ in K-3 classrooms. We asked school representatives to describe their school's early literacy program and

identify its strengths, challenges, and additional resources that would most help their school's literacy program.

The research questions are:

- What K-3 literacy practices are used by Philadelphia's charter schools?
- Specifically, what are the schools' classroom instructional practices, teacher training and supports, targeted interventions for struggling students, and successes and challenges?
- What resources do schools need to support literacy instruction?

We interviewed 38 school representatives and charter management organization (CMO) leaders about K-3 literacy practices in their school(s). Of the 38 people interviewed, 35 represented individual schools, although some of those schools were part of larger charter networks. The remaining three respondents occupied leadership roles in charter management organizations or networks and therefore described literacy instruction across their organization. Throughout this report, we refer to those respondents as "CMO leaders." The people interviewed for this study held a range of positions in their schools and organizations. Respondents included:

- Nine classroom teachers, the majority of whom had a leadership role in instituting their school's early literacy program.

- Seven reading specialists. In some cases, the reading specialist served as a leader for their school's literacy education program. Four of the seven reading specialists reported providing direct student service.

- Fourteen mid-level administrators, whose roles included teacher coaching, conducting classroom observations and completing teacher evaluations, instituting professional development trainings for teachers, overseeing curriculum implementation, and selecting or constructing the literacy curriculum.

- Eight upper-level administrators, with titles such as Chief Academic Officer and Assistant Principal. The responsibilities of these upper-level administrators were broader in scope than those of mid-level administrators. Often, they were people to whom mid-level administrators might report.

We invited all Philadelphia charter schools and CMOs serving kindergarten to third grade students to participate in this study. Charter schools and management offices were asked to identify a single representative to participate in a 30-minute interview. Researchers asked respondents to describe the literacy program of the school they represent and asked specific follow-up questions framed by the early literacy research. Importantly, this research has certain limitations:

- School representatives may not have mentioned some elements of their programming during the 30-minute interview;
- We only interviewed one representative from each school or charter network central office; and
- Interviews do not provide evidence of implementation.

Findings from these conversations provide a first look at the landscape of early literacy practices in Philadelphia charter schools and can begin the discussion of how to build on schools'

commonalities and strengths to better support Philadelphia students as they develop their literacy skills.

How previous research on effective literacy practices informed this study

We designed the interview questions based on a framework rooted in current early literacy research. The framework identified multiple dimensions of high-quality early literacy instruction, particularly classroom instructional practices, assessment, supporting struggling readers, supporting English learners, connecting to students' lives, and teacher training and supports. The dimensions of high-quality literacy instruction are summarized below and detailed in "The Literature Framework" boxes throughout the report.

CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Teaching literacy requires elements of classroom instruction that target the five key areas of literacy development – phonemic awareness (sound awareness), phonics (the connection between sounds and letters), vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (accuracy and speed) (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). We identified four research-based elements of classroom instruction that target those five key areas:

- *Code-focused instruction*, which includes awareness of sounds and the connection between sounds and letters, teaches children to break the alphabetic code (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).
- *Shared reading* activities that engage children with text at a range of levels, with adult support (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).
- *Language development* activities, which build vocabulary, listening comprehension, and verbal expression (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).
- *Writing* instruction that is explicitly linked to reading instruction (Graham et al., 2012).

A balanced literacy approach integrates these instructional emphases across whole-group, small-group, and individual instructional settings.

ASSESSMENT

Research shows that effective instruction is guided by student assessment. More specifically, assessment produces data, which form the backbone of strong instruction. Early literacy teachers may use a combination of different formative assessments, which assess learning in progress, and summative assessments, which assess students' mastery at the end of an instructional cycle (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

SUPPORTING STRUGGLING READERS

Some students require extra help navigating the complex, challenging process of becoming a proficient reader and writer. Best practices to support these students include using formative assessments, modifying instruction based on assessment data, using tiered intervention systems that match students with different levels of need to supports of varying intensity, and providing intensive interventions for the most challenged students (Gersten et al., 2008).

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LEARNERS

Many English learners thrive in the early years of school; however, these students often benefit from extra support as they master a new language and acquire literacy skills simultaneously. Best practices to support English learners include formative assessments to identify students' strengths and needs and intensive, small-group interventions that target development areas through direct instruction (Gersten et al., 2007; Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

CONNECTING TO STUDENTS' LIVES

Families play a critical role in young children's literacy development. Families that read with their kids boost their children's language and literacy skills (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Barbarin, Downer, Odom, Head-Reeves, 2010). Research also shows that children do better in school when their families are in contact with teachers and involved in their schools (Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010). Schools can help facilitate this family involvement.

TEACHER TRAINING AND SUPPORTS

Research shows that effective professional development plays a key role in improving teachers' instructional practices (Wasik & Hindman, 2011; Landry et al., 2009) and classroom environments (Dickinson & Caswell, 2007). Ultimately, research links these improvements to student learning (Landry et al., 2009; Bierman et al., 2008; Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Best practices suggest that ongoing coaching in combination with workshops and time-limited training helps teachers grow (Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008).

What the study found: the big picture

We found that charter schools share a vision to implement early literacy best practices, as well as several common strengths and challenges, despite variation in specific implementation strategies. Detailed information about what we found in nine key areas can be found in "What the study found: the details."

Philadelphia charter schools report a broadly similar set of approaches to early literacy programming.

By design, Philadelphia's charter schools have considerable flexibility in their instructional approaches as long as the approaches are consistent with the original charter. In theory, this flexibility could produce wide variation in early literacy programming in the charter sector. However, we found broad consistency across the sector in how schools describe their approaches to early literacy. Most charter school representatives reported that their school literacy program seeks to:

- Address multiple key elements of literacy instruction across a range of classroom settings, including small-group and individual settings, reflecting a **balanced literacy** lens;
- Build and implement a **tiered intervention system** for students who struggle;
- **Engage with students' families** to support children's literacy development in non-school hours; and
- Provide training and **support for teachers**.

Reported efforts to implement best practices suggest that most Philadelphia charter schools are familiar with research-based early literacy best practices.

Charter schools identified staff capacity for high-quality early literacy instruction as a key lever for improvement.

School representatives pointed to staff capacity as an integral component for implementation of a strong early literacy program at their school. Some school representatives (19 schools and three CMO leaders) identified increasing staff capacity as a challenge at their school, while others (11 schools and two CMO leaders) identified investments to support staff capacity as a strength of their school's program. References to staff capacity fell into two categories:

- **Deepening the skills of existing teachers:** While some school representatives reported the need for more coaching, collaboration, and strategic support in critical areas of literacy instruction to support early literacy development for all students, others named teacher training and supports as an area of strength for their early literacy program.
- **Hiring additional staff to support early literacy:** Some schools reported adequate staffing for early literacy instruction, while almost one quarter of schools reported needing additional support staff. Other respondents identified adequate staff and high levels of staff retention as areas of strength. Either way, almost all respondents brought up staffing issues at some point in the interview, leading us to believe that these issues are critical for successful literacy instruction.

Despite consistency in broad approaches to literacy, charter schools varied widely in their specific resources and strategies.

Most charter school representatives described efforts to implement multiple key elements of early literacy programming in varied instructional settings, which is the fundamental idea behind balanced literacy. Most charter school representatives also identified staff capacity as vital for strong programming. At the same time, charter schools' specific early literacy strategies and resources vary. For example, though most representatives said their literacy programming incorporated multiple key components of literacy, schools varied in focus and emphasis. Schools and charter management organizations vary in both the amounts and types of training and supports available to support their respective early literacy programs. Most schools have reading specialists, and many have teaching assistants; however, the roles and responsibilities of these staff vary. Some school representatives described structured, systematic professional development plans, while others described less formal approaches. Schools also vary in whether they use external professional development, internal instructional coaches, or a combination of both.

Certain elements of early literacy programming are both strengths of and challenges for charter schools.

Each charter school representative identified strengths in their school's literacy practices; many of these approaches, if shared with other schools, could support the Philadelphia charter sector at large. Some schools' areas of strength complemented other schools' identified areas for growth. For example, writing, small-group instruction, individualized student supports, and guided reading--a type of small-group instruction focused on reading strategies and skills (Tompkins, 2010)--posed the most difficulty for schools. At the same time, some school representatives referred to these

issues as areas of strength, indicating that schools could learn from one another's successes. Similarly, school representatives also reported staff capacity and the need to balance flexibility with accountability as both challenges and strengths.

In this report, we use the following icons to call attention to strengths and challenges:

Strength: Indicates an area that respondents reported as a strength of their schools' early literacy programs.

Challenge: Indicates an area that respondents reported as a challenge of their schools' early literacy programs.

Opportunity: Indicates an area that some respondents reported as a strength and others reported as a challenge.

Implications for policy and practice

Charter schools share a vision of best practices and, because of their identified strengths and common challenges, may benefit from knowledge-sharing.

All schools, whether operating independently or as a part of a network, may have much to gain by looking to one another for solutions to common challenges. Charter schools share a vision rooted in best practices and may benefit from networking and sharing knowledge and experiences. The groundwork for this strategic collaboration may already be in place. Organizations with a mission to support charter schools may be able to facilitate this knowledge-sharing. Interviews in this study did not focus on structures or organizations that support Philadelphia charter schools.

Charter school leaders could convene to explore a range of opportunities for supporting and strengthening early literacy programs.

The charter school representatives we interviewed agreed on common issues—particularly staff capacity—that challenge the implementation of broadly accepted best practices. These commonalities suggest an opportunity for organic, needs-based knowledge-sharing across the Philadelphia charter sector. Options include building or expanding a network of support capable of facilitating sector-wide knowledge-sharing around these issues or a workshop series focused on identified areas of need. This opportunity suggests a potential role for local organizations, such as Philadelphia School Partnership (PSP) and Philadelphia Charters for Excellence (PCE), that have served as conveners within the charter sector to expand their efforts to provide a venue for schools to learn from one another.

Future research could help Philadelphia charter schools learn from other cities' and states' approaches to supporting charter schools. Elements of other cities' and states' models could be adapted for Philadelphia and help charter schools improve early literacy instruction.

What the study found: the details

SCHOOL GOALS FOR LITERACY

> **What the study found: School goals for literacy**
>
> Most charter schools have the same essential goal for their early literacy programs: Students will read on grade level and/or reach a yearly growth goal. Other, more varied school goals include acquiring foundational literacy skills, instilling a love of reading and writing, developing bilingual/biliteracy skills, and supporting writing growth. Most schools spend between one to two hours on literacy instruction per day, although some schools reported spending considerably more. A few schools reported challenges fitting all components of their literacy programming into the school day.

More than half of school representatives (20) reported that their main student literacy goal is for students to read on grade level and/or reach a yearly growth goal. Representatives also reported various other goals of their K-3 literacy programs. Other goals included supporting foundational skill acquisition, instilling a love of reading and writing, developing bilingual/biliterate students, and supporting writing growth.

- **Supporting foundational skill acquisition:** Twelve schools focus on individual components of literacy such as phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension. One school representative explained their school's goal related to foundational skills: "We want to make sure that everybody has…phonemic awareness, is able to decode, is able to blend, and [is] familiar with how to break down words so that they can go on to read. For K to 1st grade we're really getting them to read fluently, and by second grade we're trying to get them to be able to read for comprehension."

- **Instilling a love of reading and writing:** Six schools aim to make reading and writing meaningful and enjoyable for students. One school representative explained, "Our goals are for students to read and write every day, and for them to see the joy and the purpose in doing those [activities]." Another representative said this love for literacy will lead students to "become lifelong readers and learners."

- **Developing bilingual/biliterate students:** Five respondents said their school goal is to support bilingualism and biliteracy. One representative said, "We place an equal value on both Spanish literacy and literacy in English."

- **Supporting student growth in writing:** Five schools have grade-specific student writing goals. One respondent said the literacy program aims for students to be "able to produce a written piece across three different genres identified by the Common Core."

Time spent on literacy

Most schools spend between 65-120 minutes on literacy each day (Figure 1). Three schools did not specify the amount of time for literacy and only one school explicitly said there was no clear expectation regarding time spent on literacy. All school representatives that specified the amount of time they spent on literacy reported at least one hour daily. CMO representatives reported

spending from 155-210 minutes each day on literacy, more than was reported by individual charter schools outside of their network.

Figure 1. Minutes spent on literacy daily
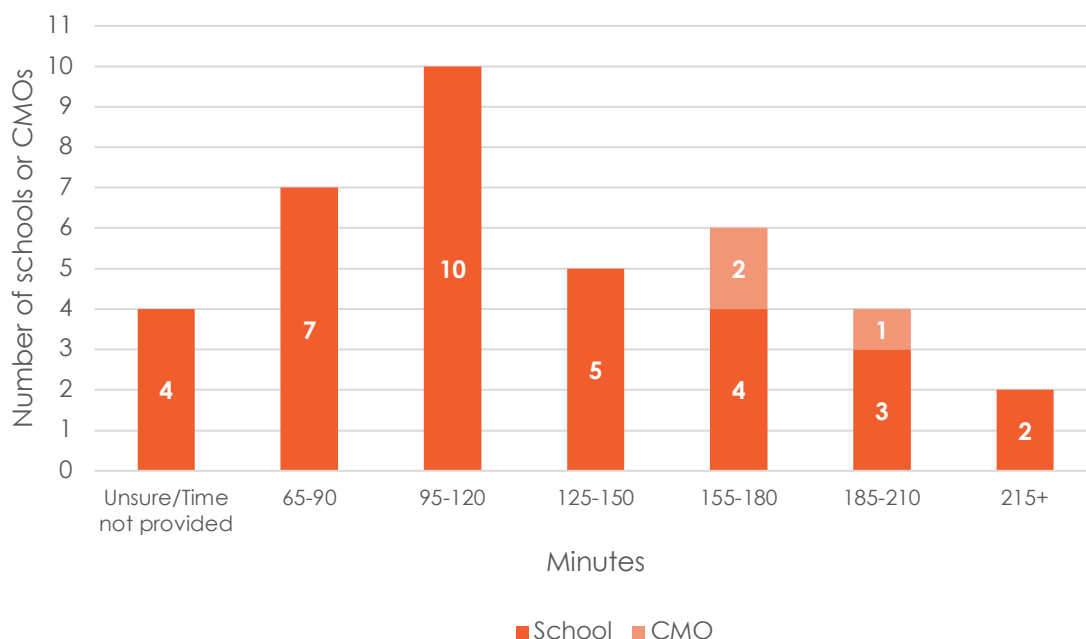
*If respondents provided a range, the chart displays the median. (n=38)

Two respondents reported that all parts of the school day include a focus on literacy. One respondent reported spending over two hours on literacy daily, but explained, "A bulk of [the students'] day is spent on literacy. That doesn't mean we're not teaching science or social studies. That means that we're teaching literature, science, and social studies through a literacy lens." Another school explained, "There's always something built in to the lessons that requires students to use their literacy skills."

Representatives from five schools reported that it can be a challenge to find adequate time for literacy programming. With many priorities within literacy instruction, some respondents wanted more time in the school day dedicated to literacy instruction, and some specified wanting more time for guided reading, phonics, or grammar.

Two representatives from dual-language schools said it could be a challenge to fit everything into the school day. One said that it was difficult to schedule literacy programming "because every student in the lower school, especially, gets one different type of special every single day, and they also get two recesses, and they also get Spanish instruction—we have to work really hard to make everything fit, and make our time really effective."

Questions to consider: *What scheduling strategies do schools use to prioritize early literacy instruction? Why do some schools face challenges fitting in all components of literacy instruction while others do not report the same challenge?*

The next section describes the classroom instructional practices schools use to reach these early literacy goals.

CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

This chapter is divided into sections framed by existing research about instructional content and settings that are most clearly linked to early literacy development.

What the study found: Classroom instructional practices

At the classroom level, schools' overall approaches aligned with best practices: most schools focused on multiple key areas of literacy development in different instructional settings. Particular strategies and emphases, however, varied across schools. Small-group instruction, specifically in the form of guided reading, is a central element of most schools' instructional practices. Some schools said that using small-group instruction to tailor supports for students is a strength of their literacy programming, while other schools want to improve in this area. Schools could share successful strategies related to planning and leading guided reading groups and small-group instruction, which could enhance literacy instructional practices across the sector.

Fewer than half of school representatives described strategies for teaching writing, and only a few reported integrating reading and writing. Four school representatives identified writing as an area of strength, while five said it was a challenge.

Several representatives noted great variation in literacy instruction in their schools, and a few highlighted a tension between strong structure and teacher flexibility.

The literature framework: Classroom instructional practices

Research has identified the elements of classroom instruction most clearly linked to early literacy development. These elements target the five key areas of literacy development--phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000)--in ways that are appropriate for and accessible to children in the earliest years of school. These include:

- *Code-focused* instruction, which is focused on teaching children to break the alphabetic code. Code-focused instruction in grades K-3 typically targets phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and decoding skills. Explicit instruction in early phonics is one example of code-focused instruction (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).

- *Shared reading* activities that engage children with interesting and varied texts at a range of difficulty levels, with support from an adult (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). Teacher **read-alouds**, **guided reading,** and teacher-supported **independent reading** are examples of shared reading activities. Strategic incorporation of complex texts as part of a shared reading program helps build children's vocabulary and comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010).

- *Language development* activities that build children's proficiency with oral and written language. These activities typically focus on vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and verbal expression. In early-learning classrooms, language development activities often incorporate play or music in addition to explicit instruction (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009).

- Regular *writing* instruction that is explicitly linked to reading instruction so that skill-development in one area reinforces growth in the other (Graham et al., 2012).

Often, these components of literacy instruction are combined in a **balanced literacy approach** that integrates each of these instructional emphases across a range of whole-group, small-group, and individual settings. The teacher's role in the delivery of balanced literacy instruction is to guide students' learning through a combination of direct instruction, modeling, and support for independent activity.

Overall approach

Balanced literacy integrates the key areas of literacy development across a range of whole-group, small-group, and individual settings. All school representatives reported that their schools focus on multiple key areas of literacy development in a combination of instructional settings, often reflecting a balanced literacy approach.

All respondents said they used various instructional settings to implement several key components of effective literacy programming, but respondents varied in the amount of emphasis placed on components and instructional settings. For example, one school said its program used direct instruction, modeling, and independent practice to teach specific phonics, comprehension, and writing skills. Similarly, another representative described "a combination of

exposures to reading" in their school's early literacy program: "There has to be read aloud, but there also has to be independent reading, and also has to be shared reading experiences. So that's something that we try to make happen on a weekly, daily basis, depending."

Another school representative said they ensure their literacy programming takes place in a range of settings that allow for targeted instruction, "I think the whole-group instruction is nice, but really being able to fill [in] the blank with some of that phonics through the Fundations, and targeting each individual's needs through the small group, has been the most efficient." In contrast, a representative from a different school reported that their school prioritizes whole-group direct instruction over guided reading and other forms of small-group instruction.

Representatives' descriptions of early literacy programming suggest a general agreement with the balanced literacy approach; that is, respondents described integrating multiple components of literacy in whole- and small-group instructional settings. However, our interviews do not provide evidence that schools integrate all key components in each instructional setting.

Several schools structure literacy time using either the Readers'/Writers' workshop model or the Daily Five, which can support a balanced literacy classroom. The workshop approach to reading and writing engages students in "authentic reading and writing projects" and "involves three key characteristics: time, choice, and response" (Tompkins, 2010). Almost one third of respondents reported that their schools use the workshop model. One school representative reported that the workshop model at their school allows teachers to provide individual attention to students in small groups or one-on-one; two other representatives reported adapting the workshop model to meet the needs of all students.

The Daily Five, introduced by Gail Boushey and Joan Moser in their book, *The Daily 5: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Early Grades* (2006), is a "method that offers students the following five choices of activities to work independently toward personal literacy goals: Read to Self, Work on Writing, Read to Someone, Listen to Reading, [and] Word Work." Four schools use the Daily Five to structure small-group time for literacy. At one school, the Daily Five structure of the literacy block means students are involved with those five activities, "So they're all rotating, so as it goes on they should hit at least three of those a day."

Comprehensive resources for literacy instruction: Most school representatives (28) reported using a comprehensive curriculum to guide literacy instruction. Most schools with a comprehensive curriculum used Houghton Mifflin's *Journeys* (nine schools) or McGraw-Hill's *Wonders* (six schools). School representatives reported that these curricula are often used as a guide, and they supplement and adapt these resources.

Code-focused instruction: phonics

Code-focused instruction teaches children to break the alphabetic code. In grades K-3, it typically targets phonological awareness (the ability to recognize and work with the sounds of spoken language), alphabet knowledge, and decoding skills (translating printed text using the understanding that letters and groups of letters represent sounds). Explicit early phonics

instruction is one example of code-focused instruction (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). Seven school representatives reported that direct phonics instruction was a part of their literacy programming. Four schools and two CMO leaders identified their phonics curriculum, Wilson Fundations, as a strength of their literacy program.

> **Resources for phonics instruction:** Fourteen school representatives and CMO leaders reported using a stand-alone program to guide their phonics instruction, most often Wilson Fundations (nine schools).

Shared reading

Shared reading refers to any activity where multiple people are engaged with the same text. Read alouds are a shared reading activity in which a teacher reads aloud and actively involves students in the experience (Tompkins, 2010). Thirteen school representatives and one CMO described a whole-group shared-reading activity as a component of their literacy program.

About one third of respondents reported that their programs include whole-group shared reading activities, but this practice varied across schools. Three schools shared distinctly different approaches:

1) At one school, a teacher selected a topical read-aloud book and planned related activities according to weekly objectives:

   There's usually a teacher read-aloud that also incorporates that vocabulary so they [the students] hear it again in a different way. And then usually that teacher read-aloud has to deal with the topic that week so it'll go along [with] the two stories in our lesson. Then we just gradually go into our direct instruction, whole-group reading of our story, and we just follow the essential question for that lesson and questions are asked based on the essential questions for the week. Then we will go over the story, like this week they're comparing and contrasting. So they're comparing and contrasting characters in the story. So we might do a Venn diagram—something to go along with the story.

2) Another representative described an emphasis on student-led whole-group reading:

   Whole group would be the introduction to a story, the vocabulary, sight words [common words that students are taught to identify immediately rather than decode], the grammar. They go over the story, they check for fluency, the children are made to read aloud as much as possible. Even in first grade, even though everything is read to them, usually by January the first-grade teachers stop reading everything and have the students do more of the reading. Although there are times when the teacher does have to do the reading for first grade, but they try to have the kids do as much reading as possible.

3) A third representative described shared reading that varies across early grades:

   In kindergarten, the shared reading might be reading a big book [or oversized children's book used to facilitate shared reading], but focusing on some sort of standard, whether it is a language standard, or a comprehension standard, a phonics, whatever it may be, but in the context of whole-group format using text that's accessible to all of them. Whereas the second

and third grade, they're all going to have a copy of their own grade level text and be reading it at the same time with strategic questioning happening to focus on a skill or a standard. So that's more of your whole-group, standard-aligned instruction for literacy.

Small-group instruction and guided reading

Small-group instruction allows teachers to support students in a more individualized context. Almost all school representatives and CMO leaders reported that their school implements small-group literacy instruction. Respondents most commonly named guided reading as their school's small-group instructional practice. Schools use the term "guided reading" differently, but it is often a teacher-led intervention in which small groups of strategically grouped students practice targeted skills while reading from individual copies of the same, appropriate-level text.

Almost every school representative and CMO leader described small-group literacy instruction, most often guided reading, as a central element to their program. One school representative called differentiation through small groups "the key" to their literacy instruction. Another school representative described how their program uses small groups to provide differentiated support:

> *It really is the small group and meeting the needs of that small group, to have them be able to further themselves with whatever skills that we're working on. And the focus of the small groups are the whole-group skills that are being taught, and for those children who are not able to master it by evidence of teacher observation or exit tickets [used at the end of a lesson to assess students' progress towards the objective]—that's where we come back and we'll remediate and differentiate and make that skill more accessible for that child so that they can eventually become successful.*

Another representative described their school's guided reading process, which also provides an intentional, differentiated opportunity to sharpen students' skills. While sitting with a small group of students, the teacher first teaches the skill the group will work on (such as making inferences) and then models the skill. Then, as each student tries out this skill, the teacher observes the student and provides individual coaching:

> *They read to themselves but you are listening in and essentially having a conference with each kid and as you are listening in. That is when you are prompting them...and obviously taking notes during that time. At the end, you are going to pull them back together, review what you saw that they did well, push them on where they need to be pushed.*

A representative from a different school emphasized that the guided reading time is "tailored" to student needs: "You're not giving a ton of fluency passages to kids who read fluently if their struggle is with comp[rehension]."

Resources for guided reading: Interview respondents (14) reported that their schools use a range of resources during guided reading instruction, including materials from the online resource Reading A-Z (four schools) and readers produced by Fountas & Pinnell (four schools). Two respondents reported using the book sets included in a comprehensive literacy curriculum.

Ten school representatives and one CMO leader described individualized instruction and tailored student supports as a strong component of their literacy program. One school leader described the importance of tailored instruction and small groups: "I think the smaller you can make your instruction—the more targeted, the more efficient—the [more] kids learn."

One representative said the school's literacy programming allowed teachers to spend one-on-one time with each student and tailor conferences and small-group instruction to particular student needs:

> *We really are reading with I would say almost every kid every day…everyone's getting some sort of small-group instruction with reading every day… We're also really good at meeting and recognizing who needs that extra support and finding ways to give it to them… and I think conferencing is something that we do well too. Again, that's looking at where the kids are. What do you need in this moment in order to make your writing stronger, your reading stronger, and then going from there.*

Two school representatives mentioned that guided reading, which provides opportunities for tailored support, was particularly a strength in K-2. Another school representative said the school provided strong small-group instruction in general, and that teachers successfully used conferences to meet the needs of individual students.

Four school representatives said that that guided reading and other forms of small-group instruction can be challenging for teachers to implement well. Representatives reported the following specific challenges:

- **Using best practices:** "Because what I believe in guided reading, most of my teachers are doing, is not exactly good practice. […] So there are still teachers who are not doing best practices for guided reading because there's nobody there to say that you have to do it."

- **Training and support:** "Some of them are really good at it and some of them are still struggling, so there's definitely a wide range, and we've tried to do professional development and observations of other teachers, but there's always room for improvement with guided reading, and getting on the same page with it, also."

- **Instructional time:** "Most teachers find that they don't have enough time in guided reading ever."

- **Planning time:** "It's a constant struggle…being able to break the children up, and have the time to actually plan for all of those groups to have something to do while you're actually working with a group."

As discussed in the "Staff who support early literacy" section on page 26, some respondents wanted more support staff to work with students in small groups.

Independent reading

Twenty-two school representatives and two CMOs reported that independent reading is a component of their early literacy program.

Though independent reading is a common practice in charter schools, it is unclear from our interviews what supports teachers provide during this time. One school representative explained that during readers' workshop, teachers are working "with kids to pick books that they tend to actually read independently and making sure that time is sacred to them and, throughout

the day, reading is used in their choice time." Independent reading time and conferencing is inherent in the Readers' Workshop model, which 12 respondents reported implementing. Three school representatives reported using the 100 Book Challenge, an intentional independent reading program by the American Reading Company. One of them shared the way that they use this practice in their classrooms:

> While independent reading is happening, there is either a small group or one-on-one conferencing happening to target the student's individual needs…. During that independent reading time, they pick a book to read for pleasure. They're supposed to build up their reading stamina and read for pleasure, but there should be some sort of accountability component, whether it's accountable talk or whatever. And they all are supposed to know their power goal, which is the highest leverage kind of skill that they need to be working on to bump them up to the next level. And they should be focusing on that or on some sort of application piece while they're doing their independent reading for pleasure. And then during that time is when the teacher pulls either small group or students one-on-one to assess their current reading behaviors, diagnose any specific needs, and/or instruct.

Other respondents noted that independent reading is a component of their program without describing how teachers support this practice, for example, as a part of the Daily Five or other daily independent reading time.

Language development activities

Language development activities build children's proficiency with oral as well as written language. These activities typically focus on vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and verbal expression. In early-learning classrooms, language development activities often incorporate play or music in addition to explicit instruction (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009). The shared reading practices described above may support listening comprehension. Only two school representatives described literacy programs with language development activities besides shared reading.

Though shared reading activities support listening comprehension, respondents rarely reported other language development activities. Two school representatives described direct vocabulary instruction. One school representative said:

> We always start out with reviewing our vocabulary for that week. And in the students' workbooks, they have vocab context cards. We read the vocabulary word in a sentence and then talk about the meaning of that word. And the students might even act out that word. They might put it in their own sentence, so just getting used to using that word. And then there's usually a teacher read aloud that also incorporates that vocabulary so they hear it again in a different way. And then usually that teacher read aloud has to deal with the topic that week so it'll go along the two stories in our lesson.

Writing

Regular writing instruction is an important component of literacy development, especially when integrated with reading instruction. Fewer than half of respondents independently brought up writing instruction.

Writing instructional practices varied across schools. The 14 school representatives and two CMO leaders who described writing instruction in their schools reported strategies ranging from the established workshop model to quick, informal writing routines.

- **Writers' Workshop:** Nine school representatives and two CMOs reported that their writing instruction is structured by the workshop model. Writing workshop provides students with opportunities for authentic writing activities and consists of writing, sharing, and teaching mini-lessons (Tompkins, 2010).

- **Writing components of curricula (particularly, Superkids, Fundations, Wit & Wisdom, and Wonders):** One representative explained that Fundations "incorporates a writing piece, handwriting, narrative writing, all of those things are wrapped up in one. And Wit & Wisdom has a portion of writing that's infused throughout the lesson each day. So, there's always exposure to…different writing types." However, this representative noted that writing instruction is a work in progress, as did the other two school representatives who reported that their writing program centered around what their curricular resources provided.

- **Modeled writing:** Two representatives reported that teachers in their schools use the Children's Literacy Initiative's Message Time Plus, which is an instructional practice in which teachers model the entire process of writing text, including brainstorming, planning, composition, and transcribing (Children's Literacy Initiative, 2017). Then, teachers and children read the text together.

- **Quick writing routines:** Two schools use writing as a warm-up during literacy instruction time. One school representative said, "We start off with a writing prompt to get them writing right away so that's a quick write, pretty much, so that takes about 15 minutes or so." One school reported ending their guided reading sessions with "some sort of writing…which is real quick."

Four school representatives said that they intend to integrate reading and writing instruction. Other schools may also integrate reading and writing, as we did not probe about this practice in interviews. One school provided an example of that integration, saying:

> *And then, of course, they will respond to that comprehension in the notebook as they write, but it will be in pictures, using pictures, and then as soon as they're learning how to write and how to decode together, we're trying to represent the picture with a sentence, and then you start pushing them, "Okay. Now we can use our sounds to form words and to form sentences!" So they figure it out. But that's why the first semester I like to spend time with the kids analyzing the sounds… forming those words, so then they can…apply it onto a comprehension level in the writing.*

This school representative explained that writing is often used as a response to reading in their program.

Writing instruction was identified as a strength in some schools but an area for support in others. Four school representatives and one CMO leader said that writing instruction was a strength at their school; five school representatives and one CMO leader reported that their writing instruction needed more support.

Those who cited writing as an area for support named the following specific challenges:

- **A need for focus and training in specific strategies:** "There's no specific writing goals or training specifically how to teach writing or improve students' writing. There's nothing like that."

- **Integrating reading and writing:** "I think everyone's trying to figure out how do we build stronger writers and not just reading in separation." This was named as a particular challenge for newer teachers when integration is not explicitly built into the curriculum.

- **Supporting students in responding to texts:** One CMO leader said schools need to provide more opportunities for students to respond to books and texts in writing. This leader explained that this skill becomes more necessary as students advance in grades, and students need to practice writing responding to texts.

- **Resources for writing:** Some schools reported using the writing components of curricula, particularly Superkids, Fundations, Wit & Wisdom, and Wonders.

Third grade differences

Some respondents (six) said that literacy programming looked different in third grade. Four of these schools attributed these differences to the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment), which starts in third grade. One respondent said, "[Literacy] looks different in third grade. So third grade, we're doing Coach books [created by Triumph Learning] right now to get ready for the PSSA, and we split that up during guided reading and direct instruction." Another explained, "Third grade does not do a guided reading block, but they do have a reader's workshop block...The reason why they are a little different is because that is a grade that is tested for the PSSA." The other schools attributed these differences to scheduling (i.e., third grade switches classes) or development (i.e., there is less shared reading in third grade than earlier grades).

Flexibilities in practice

Several school representatives (ten) noted great variation in literacy instruction in their schools, and three school representatives highlighted a tension between strong structures for literacy programming and flexibility for teachers. "I think that we really do try to be responsive to kids," one respondent said, "...And not just being like, 'Oh well, this is what we have to follow, and we all have to be [doing] the same thing at the same time.' We are not like that and so I think that is all good."

Other respondents found flexibility within the literacy program to be a challenge: "The expectation is that they're supposed to be writing, and they're supposed to be doing reading...And I've seen some teachers say that they're doing reading, and all they do is sit there and have the kids read in the textbook, and don't even touch the kid at all. But they've done reading because the kids have read." Another school representative commented that a lack of structure in the literacy program is challenging for new teachers, but provides creative flexibility to more experienced teachers.

Questions to consider: *How can schools support key practices like small-group instruction? What successful strategies for integrating reading and writing could be replicated in schools? Why is writing instruction a strength in some schools but not others?*

CLASSROOM LIBRARIES AND CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO BOOKS

Almost all (31/38) respondents reported that their schools have classroom libraries; however, the size and form of those libraries varied. Some schools also reported having a school library or book room.

About half of respondents (15) said that teachers were responsible for building their own classroom libraries. Often, teachers curated personal classroom libraries over the course of their teaching careers. Inevitably, when teachers build their own libraries, the book selection will vary. One respondent said, "Yeah, I would say everybody does have a classroom library—some of them are not as good as others. And that's not—we really had to, as teachers, build that ourselves."

More than one quarter of respondents (11) reported that they had leveled book sets, or books organized by reading levels. For example, one respondent said the school provided leveled libraries from the American Reading Company's 100 Book Challenge. Another respondent described these types of classroom libraries: "We do have the student level books that go along with the Journeys [books] that we use for guided reading."

Respondents reported mixed levels of satisfaction about the selection and variety of texts available for students. Most said that, although they were mostly satisfied, they would always welcome more books. One school representative said, "We could always have more. There's never such a thing as enough books. But, we're pretty okay." Other schools, however, expressed a critical need for more books. One school representative said, "When we get any money, we buy books...If a kid gets stuck on a level for a while, they can read through all the books, and that's boring. How is that at all motivating to become a better reader?" Another respondent said, "We definitely need to put more into the classrooms. They're definitely—their libraries are lacking in a lot of ways, not just from levels but also from interest."

Half of the school representatives interviewed said they needed more books, including books of different levels and genres. Two school representatives described a need for more culturally relevant books. Overall, representatives wanted these books for classroom and school libraries to support both guided reading and independent reading. Some schools also wanted books to create lending libraries so students could take books home.

Four respondents said student access to books was a strength of their literacy program, while five said it was a challenge to maintain the quantity and quality of books necessary to support their students. For example, one school representative said, "Where we're really working on having enough books for each student so there's a real bounty, but they always have access to reading new books, especially if we're asking them to read so much." One representative said that obtaining leveled libraries for classrooms is a "very, very expensive thing." Another school representative said that "just keeping libraries updated" was challenging. This school representative also noted that "non-fiction is a struggle for everyone, especially in the lower levels. Just having enough and having good material is hard."

ASSESSMENT

What the study found: Assessment

School representatives most commonly reported using assessments to track students' reading levels. A small number of schools reported that the way they assess students and use assessment data was a strength: this could be an opportunity for schools that do not yet use formative assessment strategies to learn from the successes of other charter schools.

The literature framework: Assessment

Evidence shows that effective instruction is guided by assessment. More specifically, assessment produces *data,* which forms the backbone of strong instruction. Research suggests that teachers should use a combination of *formative* assessment, which assesses learning in progress, and *summative* assessment, which assesses students' mastery at the end of an instructional cycle (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Through a comprehensive program of assessment, teachers can obtain data that guides their decisions about what, how, and when to teach, and about which students may need additional support. In addition, data generated by assessments can be used at the school level to identify students in need of extra intervention (Hamilton et al., 2009).

Early literacy teachers may use a combination of different formative and summative assessments. These may include teacher-made assessments and commercially available assessments like the Development Reading Assessment (DRA) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) (Salinger, 2001). Typically, literacy assessments for grades K-3 are designed to assess the concrete competencies children should acquire in the first years of school, including letter-naming fluency and, eventually, reading fluency; decoding; and comprehension (NELP, 2008).

School representatives most commonly reported using assessments to track students' reading levels. The use of these assessments complements the goal articulated by more than half of school representatives: for students to read on grade level and/or reach a yearly growth goal. Schools used the following assessments to track reading levels or reading behaviors:

- **Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA):** Most schools using the DRA did so three times a year. One respondent explained, "We do have a basic assessment for reading and DRA which we do in the fall and then in the winter and then again in the spring." Another school representative said, "That is one of our primary ways of seeing where a student is."
- **Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA):** Four use the IRLA, an assessment tool created by the American Reading Company designed to help educators assess student reading levels. One respondent said, "With the IRLA, we're able to gauge independent reading levels of each of our scholars. They're assessed by myself, sometimes [other] leaders will help with the benchmarking, but then predominantly by our classroom teachers

and instructional assistants who are in the room, spending the most time with the kids. We get a level for them."

- **Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment Systems (BAS):** Seven respondents mentioned using the BAS to gauge students' reading levels on an ongoing basis. One representative explained why their school assesses every kindergarten student with the BAS, "We want to catch any sort of problem a child is having right away so that we can hopefully remediate it."
- **Running records:** Five respondents mentioned using running records, which are informal reading assessments during which teachers track students' reading behaviors, particularly fluency. Information from this assessment could be used to guide instruction and determine the appropriate level of text difficulty (Clay, 2001). Interviews did not provide clear information about how running records are used in classrooms. One respondent explained, "They [classroom teachers] will do running records to check in on baselines and also their notes from their guided reading lessons will direct, help us make those decisions of who's really struggling."

School representatives also reported using the assessments provided by their literacy curricula and general progress monitoring systems for tracking student growth. Of progress monitoring, one school representative explained, "Well, not everyone does progress monitoring the same way, so kindergarten in particular has a progress monitoring binder that they do every two weeks, and so that's testing blending, decoding, sight words and that kind of thing, so that's what they use to determine who's struggling, and then we have created small groups based on that."

Five school representatives said that the way that their schools assess and use data is a strength of their early literacy program. One CMO leader mentioned that using data to track students against benchmarks was important to them and they felt strong in this area. The CMO employs a director of data who helps analyze student data to set school goals. Another school leader said that there are teachers in the school who use assessment data well and that the school is trying to spread this practice: "I think some pockets of teachers really do use the data both anecdotally on a daily basis and holistically on a trimester basis to make really smart decisions, so I think I have examples and exemplars of who does that well, and I can maximize those exemplars and then replicate that across other teachers."

Respondents reported using some combination of the assessments described in this section to identify struggling readers. For example, one school representative mentioned using IRLA data to identify struggling readers: "Yes, the independent reading level assessment is used to monitor individual progress and identify struggling readers. It goes into a warehouse database so we can see how they compare to their peers and to grade level expectations."

Questions to consider: *How do teachers adjust their instruction based on assessments? How do schools make strategic decisions based on assessment data? How much instructional time and staffing resources are allotted to assessment?*

SUPPORTING STRUGGLING READERS

What the study found: Supporting struggling readers

Almost every school described a system to support struggling readers, but support strategies varied across schools. Most commonly, schools reported in-class supports, such as small-group instruction and guided reading, or pull-out supports. Some schools described a tiered intervention system. A few school representatives reported that it is challenging to meet the needs of all students, and those schools might learn from school representatives who reported that tailored student supports are a strength of their program.

The literature framework: Supporting struggling readers

Becoming a proficient reader and writer is a complex and challenging process. Many students navigate this process successfully without extra supports; however, other students, including those with disabilities, require extra help building their early literacy skills. Research highlights a number of best practices for schools that seek to support struggling readers and writers. These include (from Gersten et al., 2008):

- Universal screening to identify literacy challenges early and monitor growth during the year;

- Differentiated instruction in the classroom, guided by assessment data that highlights individual students' needs;

- A school-wide system of tiered interventions that matches supports of varying intensity with students who have different levels of need and includes both small-group and one-on-one interventions; and

- Intensive interventions for the most challenged students.

Although almost every respondent described a system to support readers who struggle, strategies to support these students varied across schools. Schools' supports for struggling readers range from in-class supports including additional guided reading time with a classroom teacher, to pull-out programs administered either by additional staff or a reading specialist.

- **Support within the classroom:** More than one third (14) of school representatives described strategies used within classrooms to support struggling readers. Some respondents mentioned these strategies in combination with other supports available at the school, while others said there was nothing available other than what the classroom teacher could provide. School representatives often described in-classroom interventions like small groups and guided reading.

- **Pull-out support:** A similar number of respondents (16) reported providing support outside of the classroom to struggling students by pulling them out to work with other staff (often reading specialists). Typically, these representatives reported that a reading

specialist works with a small group of students anywhere from two to five times a week for about 30 minutes. The specifics vary from school to school. Often, the reading specialist uses a specific program or resource to support the intervention time with students. Schools without reading specialists use other staff to support struggling readers; for example, one representative reported that classroom assistants provide this support: "Classroom assistants pull students, sometimes in the morning, to do an extra word study group. My classroom assistant pulls a small group of students two to three times a week to do a little bit of extra word study practice because they need that. They need that extra time to be successful."

- **Tiered intervention system:** Some schools (eight) use a tiered intervention system, or response to intervention and instruction model, at their school. For example, one respondent explained, "It's kind of an RTI [Response to Intervention] model where you have tiers. You have to first do some specific things in your classroom. Next, then you bring it back to the team that reviews students' progress. And then they may make the recommendation of, this student would benefit from working in an LLI [Leveled Literacy Intervention] group."

Four respondents reported that it is challenging to meet the needs of all students; at the same time, several respondents reported that providing tailored support for students is a strength of their literacy program. Schools and CMO leaders emphasized the benefits of small-group work with reading specialists and other instructors. One school representative said:

> *That one-on-one, or that small-group experience is very beneficial to them. It helps them to have someone really sit next to them to help them dissect texts, whether it be for fluency or comprehension. So, I definitely think that helps. I think their differentiated leveling [helps], and the grouping in different activities, so that the group work is never the same.*

Spending time with each student individually and tailoring instruction based on particular student needs were also cited as a strength of one school. Page 27 in "Staff who support early literacy" shows that some schools report needing more support staff, especially to conduct interventions with struggling readers or work with small groups.

Resources for interventions: Most schools (18) reported using resources for reading interventions. Schools most often used Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention (seven schools) and Wilson Fundations (six schools) to intervene with students who demonstrate a need for additional literacy support.

Questions to consider: *In what situations are different intervention strategies – within-classroom support, pull-out support, and tiered intervention support – most effective? How can schools make the most of their staff resources to support struggling readers?*

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LEARNERS

Our interviews did not focus on the ways in which schools support their English learners (ELs), but some schools described related strengths or challenges. A few schools have a dual language focus that, while not only focused on serving ELs, may provide insight into how schools can support students to grow literacy skills as they learn another language. This section is framed by the research about effective supports for readers and writers who need them.

What the study found: Supporting English Learners

No schools identified supporting English learners as a strength of their school's literacy program; two schools cited this as a particular challenge. One fifth of school representatives reported having EL specialist teachers or coordinators. In addition, dual language schools in the Philadelphia charter sector conduct literacy instruction in two languages; these programs serve both ELs and students whose first language is English.

The literature framework: Supporting English learners

Many English learners thrive in the early years of school. However, as they work to simultaneously master a new language and acquire literacy skills, these students often benefit from extra support. Research identifies several best practices for supporting English language learners in early literacy.

Consistent with recommendations for supporting struggling readers, the first research-supported strategy for English learners is a formative assessment process that identifies individual students' strengths and learning needs in key areas like phonological awareness, letter knowledge, vocabulary, and decoding. Based on the results of these assessments, research suggests many students can benefit from intensive, small-group intervention that targets development areas through direct instruction (Gersten et al., 2007; Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

As their English proficiency develops hand-in-hand with their literacy skills, vocabulary is an important area of focus for effective instruction for English learners. Along with the teachers' clear, explicit introduction of new words and expressions throughout the day, students can build their vocabulary through natural interactions with their peers. Research suggests structuring this peer engagement by pairing English learners with other students daily for literacy tasks and activities. (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Gersten et al., 2007)

🔒 **Some schools identified strengths and others identified challenges differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students, but two school representatives with small but growing EL populations specifically noted a challenge meeting the needs of ELs.** No schools identified meeting the needs of ELs as a specific strength, but about one fifth of school representatives (eight) reported having EL specialist teachers or coordinators.

Although we obtained little information about the practices that schools in general use to support ELs, **six schools in the study were dual language schools**. Although dual language schools serve both students learning English as well as English speakers learning another language, their instructional strategies represent one method of supporting students as they build literacy skills across multiple languages. A respondent described one school's dual language program:

> *You're my partner teacher. I teach in Spanish. In the morning, you had guided reading groups going. You did a read-aloud, and you also worked on writing with the kids and did some phonics work. When the kids come to me, because you saw the kids for half the day, they come to me. I'm going to teach them in Spanish. They will get a shared reading lesson as opposed to a guided reading lesson. They'll have to read aloud in Spanish and then some word work so that the concepts and content are similar, but what you're doing in your classroom is different so that you still get the balanced literacy, just not in the same language, the whole day...The day that I'm doing guided reading, you're not doing guided reading, so that the kids are actually still getting a balanced literacy.*

Although two other dual language schools described scheduling challenges related to the use of literacy activities in both languages, this school described rotating through balanced literacy activities in each language.

? Questions to consider: *What practices do schools use to support English learners? Can practices from dual language schools help schools who may need to begin integrating EL supports into their literacy instruction?*

CONNECTING TO STUDENTS' LIVES OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

What the study found: Connecting to students' lives

In order to connect literacy to students' lives outside of school, schools employed one or more of the following strategies: culturally responsive instructional materials and activities, family engagement, staff training, summer support, and reading beyond the school context. Almost half of schools actively work to develop teachers' cultural responsiveness in their instruction. Connecting with students' families is a particular challenge for a few schools. Schools could consider adopting additional strategies in order to help make literacy relevant for students and to connect with students' families.

> **The literature framework: Connecting to students' lives**
>
> Parents and families play a critical role in young children's literacy development. Studies show:
>
> 1) Regular parent engagement with children through books and reading boosts their language and literacy skills (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Barbarin, Downer, Odom, Head-Reeves, 2010); and
>
> 2) Children do better when their parents are in contact with teachers and involved in their schools (Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010).
>
> And schools can help facilitiate parental involvement: Especially in low-income communities, research shows that parents are more likely to engage in their children's educations when schools explicity invite them in, show respect for their cultures, and provide various ways to get involved (Auerbach, 2008).

More than one third of respondents (15) described family engagement strategies intended to connect the school literacy program to children's broader lives. Respondents said schools, charter networks, and individual teachers engaged in formal and informal practices designed to include parents, guardians, and other significant others in students' literacy learning. Respondents said they used books, family outreach programs, and newsletters or other forms of communication to reach out to parents.

Connecting with families, particularly about literacy instruction, was a challenge for a few schools. One respondent said it is challenging to get parents involved: "I think we have to do a better job of surveying the parents to see what would actually bring them into the building." Two respondents wanted to find a way to help families provide greater support for reading at home. One school named the way that students' families support their students as a strength of their school's early literacy program.

Representatives described five other strategies intended to connect their literacy programs with students' lives outside of the classroom. Those strategies included:

- **Culturally responsive instructional materials and activities:** Almost half of respondents (18) said they were actively committed to using texts that were inclusive of students' experiences; however, several schools (four) cited this as an area for future focus. Some school representatives considered the provision of instructional texts reflective of students' backgrounds as a way they connect to students' lives outside of schools. One respondent said these texts serve as a "mirror and a window to experience." Other schools voiced a commitment to use texts that broaden students' knowledge of the larger world.

  Schools also focused on using texts to connect to personal experiences and the broader world. Other interview respondents emphasized the importance of text-to-self and text-to-world connections in children's experiences with literature. They also spoke about the importance of reading materials having a "connection to real world events" or appearing "relevant" to students' lives.

- **Staff training:** Five respondents said their schools provided special training to develop teachers' culturally responsive instructional practices.

- **Summer support:** Five school representatives reported offering summer support to students and families as examples of connecting to students' lives outside of school. For example, schools reported providing summer reading/writing support to students to reduce reading skill loss over the summer or to assist incoming students needing remediation. Many of the programs included opportunities for families to engage with their student's literacy learning.

- **Expanding reading's relevance:** About one third of respondents (13) reported using strategies to develop children's love of reading and/or to expand reading's relevance beyond the context of school. Four of these respondents reported engaging students' literacy learning with the broader community by partnering with organizations such as the Free Library or Barnes & Noble.

Schools reported using a combination of strategies to promote family engagement, culturally responsive instruction, staff training, summer support, and the expansion of reading's relevance, to connect literacy programming to students' lives outside of school. Most respondents (22) reported using one or two of these kinds of strategies.

? Question to consider: *What strategies can schools share with one another for successfully connecting with students' families?*

STAFF WHO SUPPORT EARLY LITERACY

What the study found: Staff who support early literacy

Classroom teachers lead literacy instruction and, in many schools, additional staff such as instructional coaches, reading specialists, and teaching assistants, play various roles to provide support to teachers and students. Some schools expressed that their support staff were strengths of their literacy program, while other schools expressed the need for more support staff, in particular to provide support to struggling readers. Schools could share practices for employing and retaining early literacy classroom teachers and support staff.

Classroom teachers provide the most support for early literacy, but schools also employ a variety of support staff including reading specialists, teaching assistants, and instructional coaches. These additional staff largely fit in two categories: staff who coach and support classroom teachers and staff who provide intervention support.

Most schools have staff or external partners who serve as literacy coaches. Over half of respondents (24) reported having someone an in-house teacher coach. These individuals often provide professional development sessions and trainings. Six participants reported using coaches from a local literacy-focused organization, Children's Literacy Initiative, as part of their instructional strategy.

Half of respondents (19) reported that their school has a reading specialist to support early literacy, but reading specialists have a range of duties at schools. Reading specialists typically work in small groups or one-on-one with students identified for additional support. A few respondents said their reading specialists also assessed students' reading levels throughout the year. Some respondents said reading specialists leadership held school leadership positions and were responsible for overseeing curriculum adoption and implementation and/or providing professional development. Some respondents reported having certified reading specialists as classroom teachers.

More than one third (16) of school representatives reported using teaching assistants to support early literacy instruction, but their roles, responsibilities, and schedules varied. Many teaching assistants provide students with intervention support, and others help students practice specific skill development exercises. Respondents often stated that these staff are either certified teachers, working towards a teaching credential, or have completed two years of college.

Nine school representatives, including two CMO leaders, said they needed more support staff to conduct interventions with struggling readers or work with students in small groups. One school representative said that an "additional few trained educators in the building that are specific to intervention programs" were needed. Another said, "While we do have a lot of built-in supports in this school, I think that having specific reading specialists and, like, a reading specialist to work during intervention time…would be a huge asset." One CMO leader explained the need for more support staff:

> *Our funding in Philadelphia is lean, and so we just don't have the money to support either a full co-teaching model or having a reading specialist in each building. What we do have, though, are a good number of special education teachers who can support an intervention, but that's their sort of third priority on the laundry list of things they're responsible for—compliance being the first—and we don't have an intervention model baked into the schedule in K-2 such that there's a trigger for them then come and deliver an extra dose of Fundations, for example.[…] So, that's part of the constraints that we're operating within is how do we get the right ratio of teachers to students for small-group instruction and content expertise so that kids are getting instruction from someone that really knows their stuff.*

Having support staff to conduct additional instruction with students was a strength in four schools. Hiring support staff such as classroom assistants and intervention teachers was one strategy to achieve this goal/priority. One school representative described how support staff were used in her school, "Having the assistants in kindergarten and first grade has been really helpful because it allows the teachers to focus more on fluency and comprehension and stay away from the phonics area, which they also need, but they don't need to get in that time." Another school representative reported that having intervention teachers is a strength of the school. Overall, schools identified the importance of having appropriate staffing to support students' learning.

Three school representatives cited low teacher turnover as a strength of their school's early literacy program, acknowledging that some charter schools have high turnover. Low teacher turnover fostered strong collaboration between teachers, and helps professional development extend over a longer timeline rather than starting from scratch each year with new staff. One school said, "We actually have learned a lot from each other, and

unfortunately in a lot of charter schools there's a lot of turnover, but at my school for K-2 all of those teachers have been there at least their second year, so at least two, three years they have been there." According to another school, a positive school climate and culture has helped keep teacher turnover low:

> One of the other biggest benefits that we have is because we have a really wonderful climate and culture in both buildings; we don't turn over teachers very often. Because of that, our professional development plan has been able to be a three-year, four-year, five-year plan where we're not rebooting everything every single year and having to train two-thirds of the staff as though they're brand new. Our staff stays. We have a really good core group of people that have helped us build on a yearly basis, so we're not always rebooting.

The low turnover at that school is evidenced by a core group of teachers. The consistent staffing allows staff to build on professional development from past years and continue to grow together to support students' early literacy.

A few respondents (three school representatives and one CMO leader) reported that their schools' leadership, particularly the investments they have made in literacy, are strengths of their schools' literacy programs. The CMO leader explained how school leaderships' knowledge of literacy helps schools implement strong literacy instruction:

> When I think about the schools that are getting our strongest results and all other things being equal, our leadership teams in those buildings know their stuff, understand the content, and hold teachers accountable, and build and develop their teachers so that everybody's staying in on the same page and knows what it looks like. That is unequivocally true.

Additionally, three individual school representatives described how their schools have invested in resources that they regard as helpful for literacy, such as the Children's Literacy Initiative (CLI), Leveled Literacy Intervention, and technology for students and teachers. One school representative reported a perceived difference in their school based on these investments, "That's a major difference, in this charter school versus other charter schools, is that there's definitely support for reading."

Questions to consider: *What choice do charter schools have about staffing to support early literacy programming? What barriers exist for adequate staffing? How does staff turnover affect early literacy programs?*

TEACHER TRAINING AND SUPPORTS

What the study found: Teacher training and supports

Most schools described coaching as integral to developing teachers to support early literacy, and many schools also used other strategies like school-provided professional development and teacher collaboration. The descriptions of these supports varied across schools, and some school representatives voiced that these were areas for their school to grow. Schools could learn from each other's practices to support teachers. One third of respondents reported a need for additional teacher training at their schools.

The literature framework: Teacher training and supports

Decades of research underscore the role that effective teacher professional development plays in improving teachers' instructional practice (Wasik & Hindman, 2011; Landry et al., 2009) and classroom environments (Dickinson & Caswell, 2007), and ultimately link these improvements to student learning (Landry et al., 2009; Bierman et al., 2008; Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). The literature also reveals great diversity in how schools define and implement teacher professional development. And, it reflects the complexity of teacher knowledge, which spans knowledge in their content areas, knowledge of their students, knowledge of the learning process, and knowledge of the best ways to facilitate student understanding (Desimone, 2009; Kennedy, 1998; Shulman, 1986). This complexity has made identifying the key attributes of effective teacher professional development a challenge.

A relatively consistent finding across the teacher professional development research is that the most effective approaches rely not only on workshops or time-limited trainings but on these elements in combination with ongoing coaching that helps teachers learn in their own classrooms through cycles of observation, feedback, and reflection (Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008). Futhermore, research suggests that direct support provided to teachers is most effective when it is accompanied by a collaborative, schoolwide focus on particular aspects of teachers' knowledge and practice (Blank et al., 2008; Blank et al., 2007; Guskey, 2000).

Coaching: **Over half of school representatives described coaching as integral to their schools' approach to improving teacher capacity around early literacy instruction; however, descriptions of coaching varied.** Twenty respondents reported that ongoing coaching was an important way that teachers were supported around early literacy instruction. Descriptions of coaching included informal and formal walk-throughs, as well as self-selected consultations between teachers and designated support personnel (e.g., assistant principals, reading specialists, instructional coaches, senior lead educators). In some cases, coaching is formative; in other cases, it is evaluative. The frequency of the coaching cycles varies from weekly to monthly, and in some cases quarterly. In some instances, student performance data informs these discussions.

School-provided professional development: **School representatives also described an array of formally organized small-group or large-group professional development sessions that take place within their schools**. These training opportunities are offered weekly, monthly and or over the course of the academic year or as a need is perceived. In some instances, there is a combination of these approaches. For instance, seven respondents reported their teachers attended summer training prior to the beginning of school, in addition to having access to ongoing professional development during the academic year. Some schools reported having schoolwide professional development sessions in addition to grade-specific trainings. However, literacy is not always the sole focus of these professional development. In these cases, literacy is often included amongst of many other foci (e.g., school climate, math instruction).

Respondents also cited a mixture of delivery models for training—some are conducted within school by external organizations (e.g., American Reading Company, Journeys), some by in-house

personnel, and in six cases, respondents reported that individual teachers and instructional leaders are afforded opportunities to pursue trainings outside of school via conferences or specialized trainings. For example, one school representative discussed how his school prioritized paying for teachers to experience expert professional development outside of school, which included a day-long session with Lucy Calkins and a week-long training at Columbia, Teachers College, among other experiences.

School representatives offered contrasting perspectives about whether in-house training was better than outsider-conducted trainings. One respondent expressed this stance, "Personally, I think that the stuff in-house is usually a little bit more [effective]…because it's more tailored to their [teachers'] individual needs." Another respondent underscored the need for training to fit the specific school context, and hence advocated sending one or two staff members out for training that could be turned around to their colleagues.

Collaboration: **Respondents often discussed opportunities for teachers to meet and collaborate to discuss amongst themselves best practices or strategies for solving instructional strategies.** Seventeen respondents highlighted the value of using teachers' knowledge as a support for other teachers' learning. In fact, several respondents expressed great confidence and praise in the ability of teachers at their school to support other teachers. One school representative explained how teachers collaborate at their school in the following way:

> *We do have teachers that do have specific strategies that they come in and say 'Hey, this works a lot better, why don't you try this?' But then we also sit down and we meet together and say 'Hey, if we did this, maybe it'll work a little bit better' and so we try them in their classroom and we come back and we're like 'Yes, that works so much better.' You know, we're always back and forth collaborating with each other for the benefit of the students.*

Teacher collaboration opportunities were often instituted formally as part of weekly grade-level meetings or grade-band meetings. Other respondents described teachers meeting informally on their own or during their common planning time to do knowledge sharing and co-planning. In some instances, a school administrator or mid-level support person also joins these meetings.

Schools could learn from each other's practices to support teachers. Some respondents voiced that these supports, such as time to collaborate with one another and time to plan literacy lessons, is an area for their schools to grow. These supports were described as necessary but not always present ingredients for successful literacy instruction. Teacher supports were cited as a strength of the school literacy program by seven schools and one CMO leader.

Five schools described the practice of teachers collaborating with one another, conversing about their practice, and learning from one another as strengths. Low teacher turnover, common prep time, weekly grade meetings, and co-planning time helped facilitate this learning. One school representative described how guided reading instruction at the school is strong because teachers at the school have learned from one another; the low teacher turnover at the school helps facilitate this so that teachers get to learn from each other over a period of years.

Common prep times and low teacher turnover help teachers at one school converse and learn from one another: "Overall, overall when I look at k to three, we have not had much teacher turnaround. These people have been at it for a long time here. The K, one, and two team, not so much the three

because they're in a different band, they eat lunch together. They have some common preps. I think there's strength in that, that there's conversation."

Another school representative cited weekly meetings with each grade, as well as development times for "processing and sharing and looking at student work together" as strengths that help teachers in their work:

> *I think the teams are really strong too, and then share their successes and struggles together, which I think makes teachers more excited about what they do. So, we have a weekly meeting with each grade team, and then on top of that, Wednesday, when we have those development times, it's often spent on processing and sharing and looking at student work together, and I think it's just kind of the way we spend our time.*

These teacher support strategies, cited as strengths of these schools, can support literacy programming in other schools.

One third of respondents (11 school representatives and two CMO leaders) reported a need for additional teacher training. School representatives' requests for more teacher training ranged from general literacy instruction training to training for particular practices, such as differentiating instruction, supporting struggling students, conferencing with students, guided reading, writing, and small-group work. Three schools noted a particular challenge of having to train new teachers often and get them up to speed on their schools' model.

For example, one school representative described the challenge this way:

> *We do get new teachers frequently, and what we are asking them to do is not easy and a lot of people, they don't have the concept of it, they don't have it when they come and there aren't a lot of other teachers who have experience doing both writers workshops and readers workshops, other schools don't use it, so even if you get an experienced teacher, that is great but they have no idea how to plan these lessons and they don't even know what it's supposed to look like that can be a really big stress on the school... And then, if any of them end up leaving next year, it's like we are starting all over again. And that is a real challenge.*

Questions to consider: *How can schools support providing teachers with time to plan instruction and collaborate with one another? How can schools integrate instructional coaching to further support teachers? What are the benefits and disadvantages of utilizing in-house or external teacher training and supports?*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT LITERACY INSTRUCTION: A WISHLIST

School representatives and CMO leaders expressed the desire for various additional resources to support literacy instruction in their schools. Most commonly, schools requested staffing resources. In particular, schools requested additional staff, such as reading specialists, to provide literacy interventions with students. Schools also said that having additional instructional staff to reduce class size and/or make small-group instruction more feasible would help improve student learning.

Second, school representatives and CMO leaders reported that they needed resources for teacher training and support. They described needing training around specific aspects of literacy

instruction, more resources to train and support teacher instruction within schools, and more resources to pay for external professional development.

Finally, most schools reported books as a needed resource. Schools reported needing more, better quality books, on a greater variety of topics. Depending on the school, representatives reported needing additional books for classroom libraries, for students to take home, or within school libraries.

Figure 2. Resources charter schools reported needing

Resource Areas	Schools' Reported Resource Needs for Their Literacy Programs
General Instructional Resources	**Seven school representatives described needing particular instructional resources for literacy programming at their schools.** Four of these schools reported needing additional curricular resources, namely: a better writing curriculum, better reading content and programming for ELs, and adjustments or additions to their current phonics programs. Two schools also reported wanting resources that would help create a more engaging learning environment.
Technology	**Six school representatives said that additional technological resources (such as digital literacy programs and tablets) would help their school's literacy programming.** Four schools specifically mentioned adding iPads for students as an example of how technology could help with learning.
Libraries/Books	**School representatives and CMO leaders described wanting more and better-quality books for a variety of applications: guided reading, independent reading, lending libraries for students to take books home, and in school and classroom libraries.** Respondents noted needs for updated library materials, better books for guided reading, a greater amount of choice for students within their reading level, and overall, "more leveled, culturally responsive, high quality, engaging books in our classroom libraries."
Supports at Home	**Three school representatives and one CMO leader expressed the desire to help strengthen connections between students' homes and their schools and extend literacy supports for students at home.** Specifically, schools wanted more family literacy workshops and resources that could extend literacy programming from school to home.
School Staff who Support Literacy	**Twenty-one school representatives and three CMO leaders reported resource needs related to staff who support literacy.** Specifically, schools wanted more staff to support literacy interventions and/or reduce class or group sizes.
Teacher Training and Supports	**Fifteen schools and one CMO leader said that they needed additional resources for teacher training and support.** Specifically, schools wanted general training in teaching literacy, training on specific topics (guided reading, writing, small-group instruction, and reading workshop), more resources within their school for training and support, and additional funding for external professional development.

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