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# What's Missing from Teachers' Toolkits to Support Student Reading in Grades 3–8

## Findings from the RAND American Teacher Panel

**M**any children beyond early elementary school have difficulty reading grade-appropriate texts. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment results from 2022 indicated that only 33 percent of 4th grade students and 31 percent of 8th grade students scored at or above NAEP Proficient level (e.g., “solid academic

performance and competency over challenging subject matter”; Nation’s Report Card, 2022a, Nation’s Report Card, 2022b). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated low proficiency rates nationwide, given the many months of missed learning that nearly all students experienced; NAEP long-term trend assessments noted that 13-year-olds’ average reading scores were significantly lower in 2023 than in 2020 (Walton, 2023), and reading growth is particularly low among groups that have lower average reading achievement (Lewis and Kuhfeld, 2023).

### KEY FINDINGS

- According to a nationally representative sample of U.S. grade 3–8 teachers across all subjects, students spend more than half of their class time reading and writing.
- These grade 3–8 teachers estimate that 44 percent of their students always or nearly always experience difficulty reading the written content within their instructional materials.
- Among teachers in grades 3–8, 40 percent hold misconceptions about how students develop word reading skills, and nearly half of teachers in these grades report that their primary source of knowledge about reading instruction comes from their personal experiences in the classroom.
- Almost three-quarters of teachers in grades 3–8 say that they need access to more resources to identify and support students with reading difficulties.

Given the low rates of reading achievement across the country, many states have enacted large-scale policy changes designed to improve reading skills among students in early elementary grades (i.e., grades K–3). For example, in the past several years, the majority of states have passed legislation focused on supporting early elementary grade teachers to teach foundational reading skills (i.e., print recognition, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency) (Schwartz, 2024). Most of these laws require increased teacher professional development and coaching focused on evidence-based reading instructional approaches, and, in some cases, ban outdated practices (ExcelinEd, 2024).

Recent results from the American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS) fielded by RAND in spring 2023 showed that between one-third and one-half of teachers in upper elementary and middle grades frequently engage their students in activities that target these foundational reading skills (Shapiro, Lee, and Woo, 2024). Although state laws are intended to improve students' foundational reading skills (Olson, 2023), most are not designed to target or support reading instruction for older readers (Neuman, Quintero, and Reist, 2023). Given the evidence that many children continue to need additional support in reading after early elementary grades, reforming reading instruction in the United States likely requires that resources be targeted at students beyond the early elementary grades.

### Terms Used in This Report

Throughout this report, we define *foundational reading skills* as skills that include print recognition, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency.

In the survey from which we draw our data, we asked teachers about their perceptions regarding the extent to which their students “struggle” with reading. However, because the term *struggle* can carry negative connotations, we use the term *having difficulty* instead of *struggle* when possible. We also describe students who experience reading difficulties as “striving” readers.

However, implementing reading reform policies that include older grades is complex for several reasons. First, the reasons that students in older grades are challenged by reading can vary widely; some students might need additional instruction in foundational reading skills, while others struggle with vocabulary and/or comprehension skills (Buehl, 2017; Duke and Cartright, 2021; Foorman and Wanzek, 2016). For older students who need more explicit instruction in foundational reading skills, research suggests that such skills as decoding should be embedded in higher-order reading skill development and that teachers should routinely use “comprehension-building practices to help students make sense of texts” (Vaughn et al., 2022, p. 20). In other words, teachers of older grades who have students with weak foundational reading skills will need to take different instructional approaches than teachers in elementary grades would take to improve their students' overall reading achievement.

Second, although reading is the primary domain of English language arts (ELA) courses, teachers of other subject areas in upper elementary and middle grades also need to support students' reading, especially given the critical role that informational text plays in those subjects. However, the approach to supporting students' reading in order to access instructional content in non-ELA classes differs; reading instruction during non-ELA instructional time should include disciplinary literacy instruction, which incorporates domain-specific vocabulary and concepts, that is embedded into the content of those classes (Duke and Cartwright, 2021; Foorman and Wanzek, 2016), with a focus on comprehension techniques and high-quality extended discussion of reading material (Torgesen et al., 2007), as well as active self-regulation practices that support skilled reading (Duke and Cartwright, 2021).

Third, the resources that are most likely to benefit older students experiencing difficulties with reading will also differ from those that are beneficial for early elementary students. Baye et al.'s (2019) synthesis of 69 experimental studies of secondary reading found that extra reading periods did not have a substantial impact on students' reading skills. Instead, the researchers found positive effects for more-personalized approaches, such as one-on-one

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Despite the growing body of research on how to support older readers, it is still unclear how effectively the country’s teachers can identify students who have difficulty understanding instructional materials across the content areas.

tutoring and cooperative learning, and for models emphasizing socioemotional skills and writing-focused approaches, although they noted that much more research on promising approaches is necessary.

Despite the growing body of research on how to support older readers, it is still unclear how effectively the country’s teachers can identify students who have difficulty understanding instructional materials across the content areas or whether teachers feel like they have the knowledge and resources to support those students. Such information could lay the groundwork for states and school systems to provide better supports for teachers to address students’ reading difficulties. In this report, we explore U.S. public school teachers’ perceptions of how many of their students have difficulty with reading in grades 3–8, their knowledge about how students learn to read, their experiences supporting these readers, and what they need to help students become proficient readers. More specifically, we answer the following research questions:

1. What proportion of students in grades 3–8 have difficulty reading the written content of their instructional materials, according to their teachers, and how does this vary by grade band or subject?
2. How do teachers adapt their instruction to support readers, what knowledge sources do they draw on to do so, and how does this vary by grade band or subject?
3. What commonly provided tools and resources for identifying and supporting readers are available to teachers in grades 3–8, which of these resources do teachers say that they need, and how does this vary by grade band?

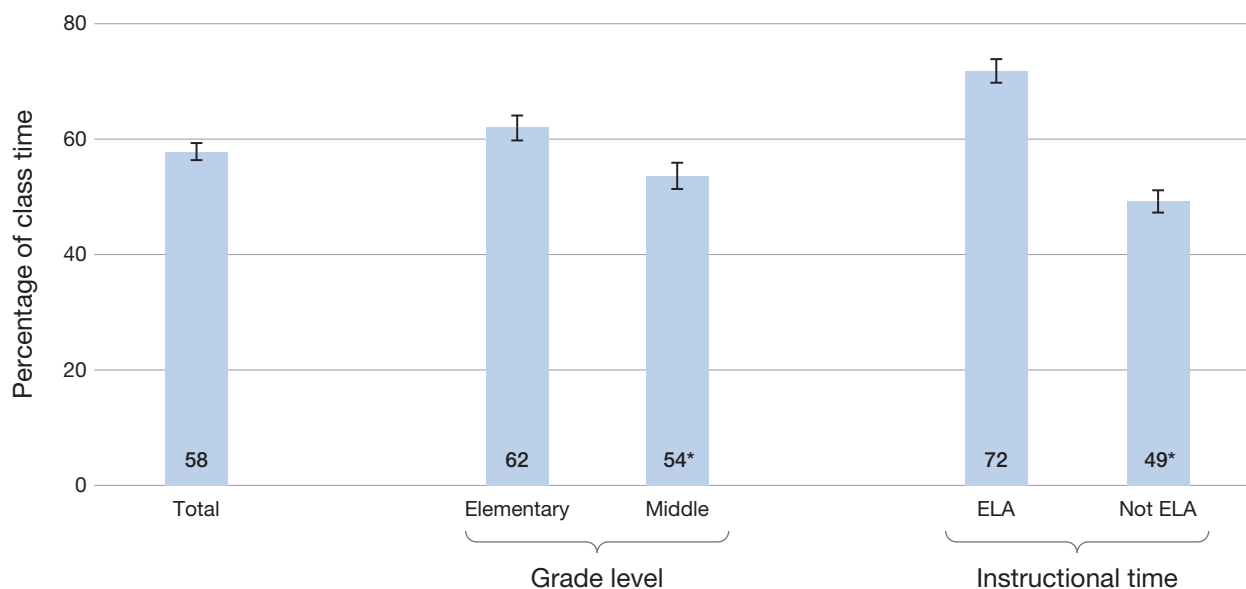
The survey items discussed in this report, which were piloted with educators prior to survey administration, ask teachers about their perceptions about the extent to which their students “struggle” reading texts. However, because the term *struggle* can carry negative connotations, we use the term *having difficulty* when discussing responses to the items we discuss, even when the item contained the word *struggle*. We also describe the students who experience difficulty as *striving readers* to acknowledge that these students are actively working, with support from their educators, to become more proficient at reading.

## **Teachers of Students in Grades 3–8 Report That Their Students Spend More Than Half of Their Class Time Reading and Writing**

To anchor teacher responses about instructional time to a specific class, we asked teachers to report about their “typical class” (see the “How This Analysis Was Conducted” box for more details), including the name of the class and the length of the class in minutes. According to grade 3–8 teachers in our full national sample, their typical class was, on average, 67 minutes long. Teachers in our sample reported that students spend, on average, 58 percent of their time reading or writing in a typical class (39 minutes). As shown in Figure 1, teachers reporting on their ELA classes reported a higher proportion of class time spent reading and writing (72 percent of the average 69-minute class time, or 50 minutes on average), and teachers reporting on other subject areas reported spending just under half of class time (49 percent of the average

FIGURE 1

Average Percentage of Class Time During Which Students Read or Write in a Typical Class, According to Grade 3–8 Teachers



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “For your typical class, what proportion of your class time would you say that students have to read or write?” Each bar represents the average percentage of class time reported by teachers.  $N = 1,480$ . Asterisks (\*) indicate a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between elementary grade and middle grade teachers and between teachers reporting on ELA and teachers reporting on other subjects. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

66-minute class time, or 32 minutes on average) reading and writing. These differences were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) even when controlling for grade level. Teachers in elementary grades (3–5) reported that their students spent more time (62 percent of the average 76-minute class time, or 47 minutes on average) reading and writing than did teachers of middle grades (54 percent of the average 58 minute class time, or 31 minutes;  $p < 0.001$ ).

### Elementary Teachers Reported More Frequent Instruction in Foundational Literacy Skills and More Independent Reading Time Than Did Middle School Teachers

Similar to earlier findings from a survey of K–12 teachers, we found that nearly half of upper elementary grade teachers (49 percent) and nearly 18 percent of middle grade teachers reported frequently (i.e., three or more times per week) teaching foundational literacy skills (e.g., explicit instruction in phonics,

phonological awareness, spelling, word recognition) in their typical class (Shapiro, Lee, and Woo, 2024). In addition to in-class time, we also asked teachers how frequently they ask their students to engage in independent reading during their typical class.<sup>1</sup> Elementary teachers were more likely to report their students engaging in independent reading during class; 63 percent have their students read independently in class three or more times per week. However, these rates differ by the subject matter of the instructional time about which a teacher was reporting. Seventy-three percent of elementary teachers reporting about ELA instructional time reported frequent in-class independent reading, compared with 55 percent of elementary teachers reporting about non-ELA instructional time. Similarly, 46 percent of elementary teachers include reading independently as part of their homework at least three times per week (56 percent of teachers reporting about ELA instructional time and 39 percent of teachers reporting about non-ELA instruction time).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, 38 percent of middle grades teachers reported that their students read independently in class three or more times per week (64 percent of teachers reporting about ELA instructional time and 26 percent of teachers reporting about non-ELA instructional time), and 24 percent of middle grades teachers include reading independently as part of their homework at least three times per week (39 percent of teachers reporting about ELA instructional time and 17 percent of teachers reporting about non-ELA instructional time). These findings suggest that elementary teachers are more likely to report that their students frequently engage in independent reading in class and as part of homework, regardless of the subject matter of the instructional time. However, in both elementary and middle grades, teachers reporting about ELA instructional time report more frequent independent reading.

### **Teachers Across Grades 3–8 Reported That Nearly Half of Their Students, on Average, Always or Nearly Always Have Difficulty Reading Texts, and Nearly All Teachers Reported Modifying Their Instruction to Support Those Students**

Teachers in our sample reported that nearly half of their students (44 percent on average) always or nearly always have difficulty reading written content within their instructional materials (Figure 2). Elementary grade teachers reported slightly higher rates of students with difficulty reading (47 percent) than did middle grade teachers (42 percent). Similarly, ELA teachers reported higher shares of students having difficulty understanding instructional materials (51 percent) than did teachers of non-ELA subjects (40 percent).

Readers should keep in mind that these findings reflect teachers' *perceptions* of the proportion of students who have difficulty reading the written content within their instructional materials and might not be perfectly correlated with the share of students who are not proficient on standardized ELA assessments.

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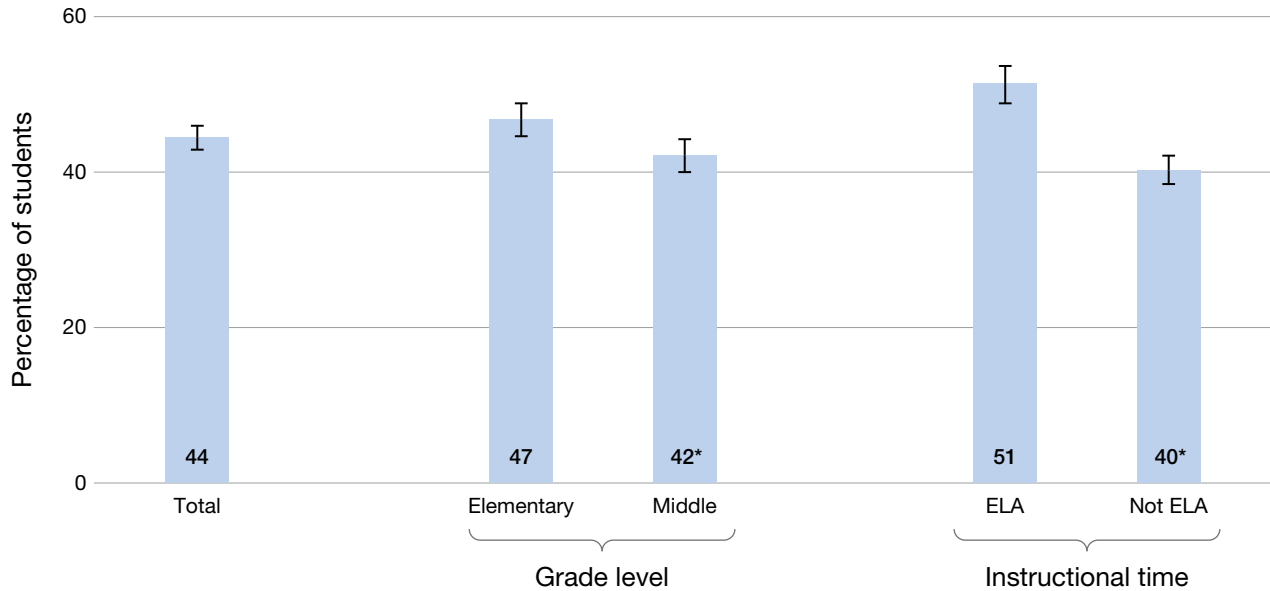
Teachers in our sample reported that nearly half of their students (44 percent on average) always or nearly always have difficulty reading written content within their instructional materials.

When we asked teachers about their confidence in being able to “identify students who struggle with reading,” a little over 90 percent of teachers said they can usually (45 percent) or always (46 percent) identify a student who has difficulty with reading. Notably, elementary teachers were more confident that they can always identify a student who is having difficulty (56 percent) than were middle grade teachers (36 percent). That said, teachers might be confident even when they do not have all the knowledge and resources to diagnose students' reading difficulties.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given teachers' estimates of the high proportion of readers who have difficulty reading grade-appropriate texts in their classrooms, nearly all teachers reported modifying their instruction to support students at least once a week (Figure 3). Of those teachers, just under 60 percent reported modifying their instruction to accommodate striving readers three or more times per week, and another 38 percent reported modifying their instruction at least once per week. Elementary grade teachers and ELA teachers reported modifying their instruction to accommodate readers more frequently than middle grade and non-ELA teachers. We did not define *modification* for the survey respondent, so teachers likely reported on a wide variety of types of modifications in their responses.

FIGURE 2

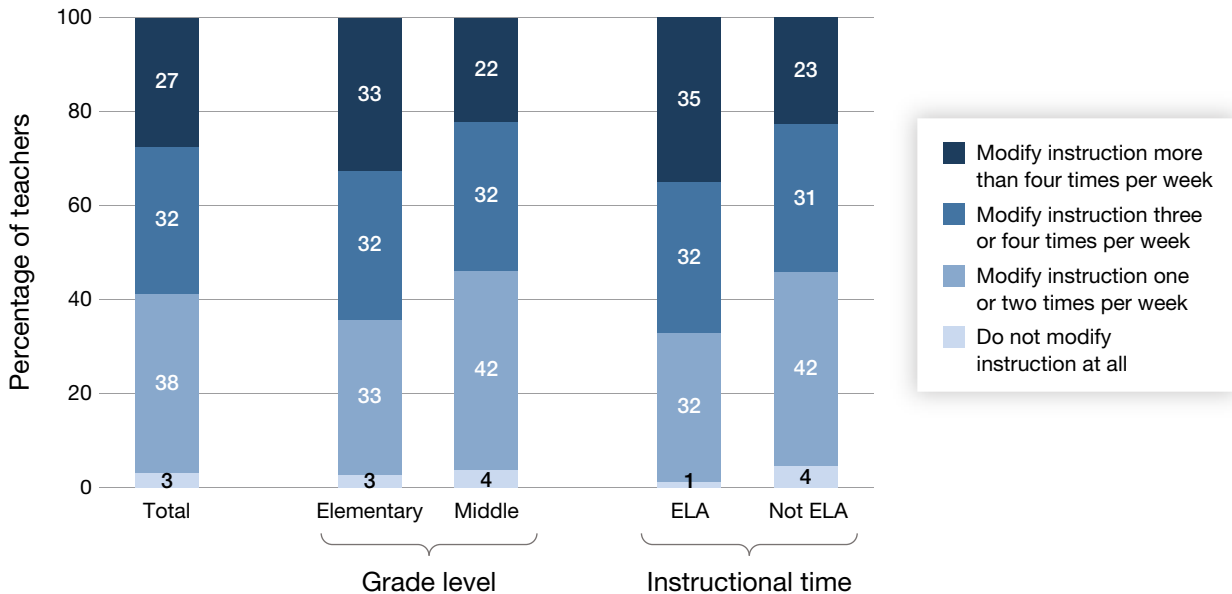
Percentage of Students Who Always or Nearly Always Have Difficulty with Reading the Written Content Within Their Instructional Materials in a Typical Class, as Reported by Grade 3–8 Teachers



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “For your typical class, what proportion of your students always or nearly always struggle with reading the written content within their instructional materials?” Each bar represents the average percentage of students reported by teachers.  $N = 1,481$ . Asterisks (\*) indicate a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between elementary grade and middle grade teachers and between ELA teachers and teachers of other subjects. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Teachers Who Modify Their Instruction to Support Students Having Difficulty Reading in a Typical Class, by Frequency of Modification per Week



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Please indicate how frequently you modify your instruction in a typical lesson to meet the needs of students who struggle with reading.” Each bar represents the percentage of teachers who responded, “Not at all,” “Once or twice,” “Three or four times,” or “More than four times.”  $N = 1,481$ . Totals might not sum to 100 because of rounding.

## Many Teachers in Grades 3–8 Hold Misconceptions About How Students Develop Word Reading Skills

As described previously, teachers of students in later elementary and secondary grades are not typically expected to engage their students in activities that develop foundational reading skills (e.g., explicit instruction in phonics, phonological awareness, spelling, word recognition), yet our prior surveys have found that they undertake those tasks regularly (Shapiro, Lee, and Woo, 2024). Unsurprisingly, the majority of “science of reading” reforms related to teacher training and professional development have not included teachers of students in older grades, and these teachers might have much less familiarity with how children learn to decode and develop reading fluency.

To measure teachers’ understanding of how students learn to decode words and read with fluency, we presented teachers with a set of statements that represent common beliefs about reading instruction that are not evidence-based; these items are ones that we borrowed from an EdWeek Research Center (2020) survey fielded to a national unweighted sample of K–2 and elementary special education teachers. These items focused on foundational reading skill development and, more specifically, phonics instruction. We recognize that these skills are just a few among the many skills that readers develop, but these items serve as a proxy for teachers’ perceptions about how students learn to read words in the early grades.

Teachers who responded *affirmatively* to any of the following three statements were indicated as holding at least one misconception about foundational reading skills instruction: “Most students will learn to read on their own if given the proper books and time to read them” (20 percent of teachers in grades 3–8 responded affirmatively to this statement); “Most students can understand written texts with unfamiliar words even if they don’t have a good grasp of phonics” (22 percent of teachers responded affirmatively); and “Phonics instruction is not useful for all children who are struggling to learn to read” (13 percent of teachers responded affirmatively). According to our analysis, 40 percent of teachers held at least one of these inaccurate beliefs (Figure 4).

Those misconceptions were more common among middle grade teachers than elementary grade teachers, regardless of main subject area(s) taught (45 percent of middle-grades teachers held at least one of these misconceptions, compared with 37 percent of elementary teachers,  $p < 0.001$ ).

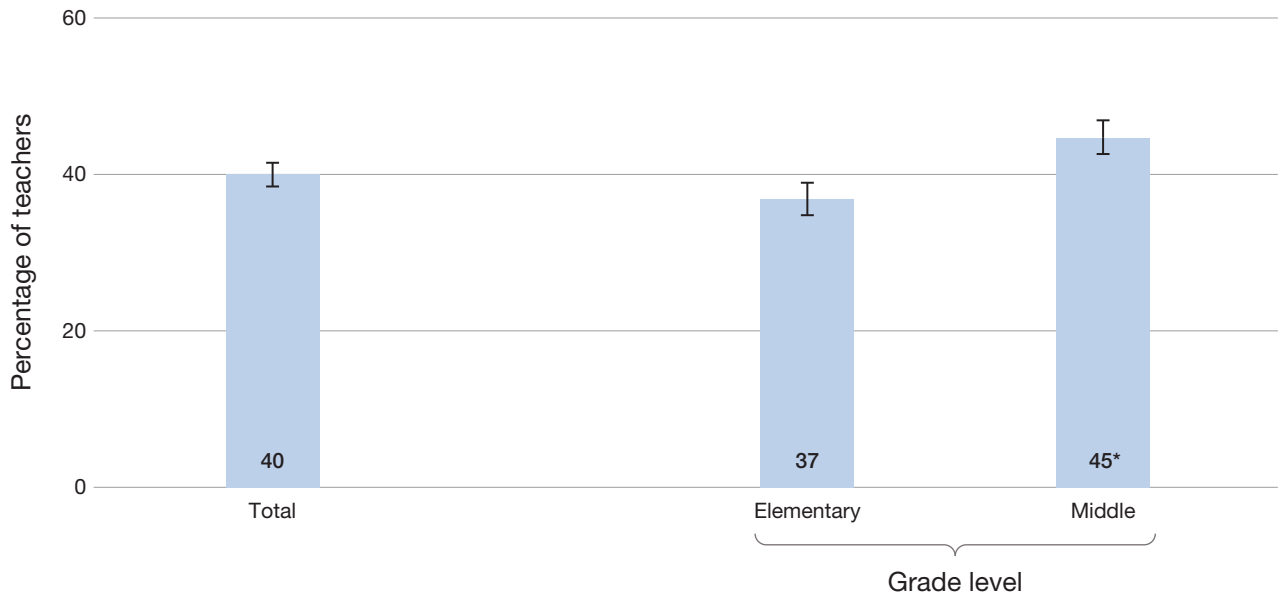
To dig deeper into teachers’ knowledge about reading, we asked teachers to indicate where they learned most of what they know about reading (Figure 5), also drawing on items from the EdWeek Research Center (2020) survey of K–2 and special education teachers. Nearly half of the grade 3–8 teachers in our sample (46 percent) reported that their own personal experiences with students in K–12 classrooms were their primary source of knowledge about reading, followed by professional development (22 percent) and other teachers or mentors (10 percent). Seven percent or fewer reported that their primary source of knowledge about reading was preservice training, their own research, a specific curriculum or program, or another source. We found no differences in the primary source of teacher’s knowledge by grade level or subject taught. Importantly, we cannot discern from these data the quality of these knowledge sources or their availability. For example, teachers might not have indicated that their primary knowledge source was professional development because they do not have access to high-quality professional learning opportunities.

## Most Teachers Reported Needing More Resources to Support Readers Who Experience Difficulty Reading Texts, Particularly Those Who Reported Receiving Fewer of These Resources to Begin With

Most teachers reported that they do not have adequate resources to support their students who are having difficulty reading instructional materials. First, we asked teachers to report whether they had access to 11 resources to support striving readers that included staff support, tools for identifying and supporting striving readers, and training to support

FIGURE 4

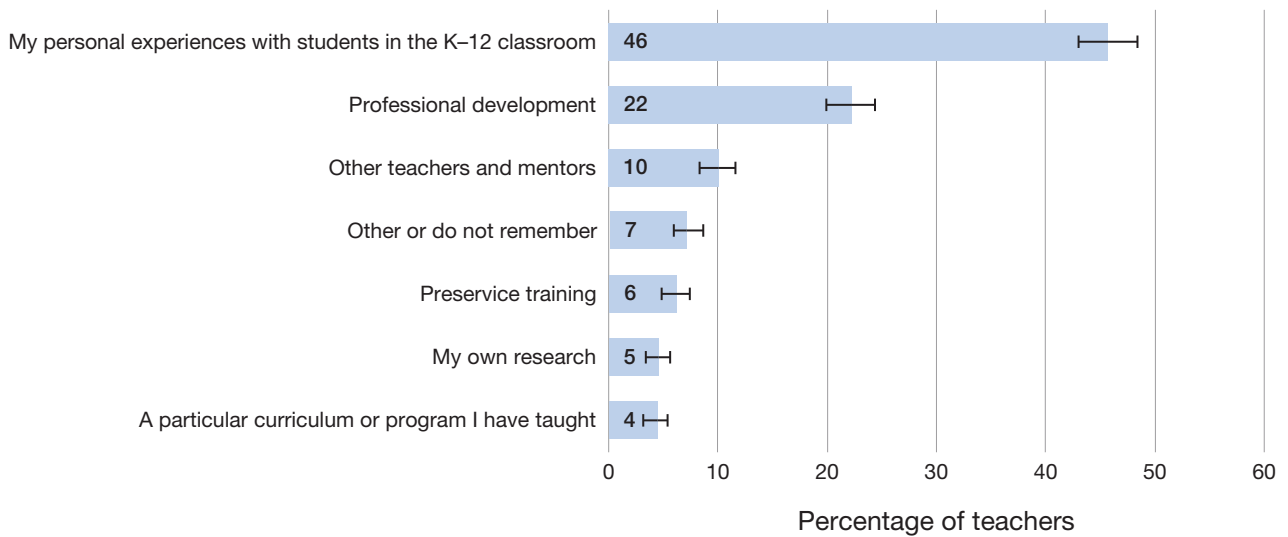
Percentage of Teachers Who Hold at Least One Misconception About How Students Learn to Read



NOTE: This figure depicts the proportion of teachers who responded affirmatively to at least one of the following items: “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” to “Most students will learn to read on their own if given the proper books and time to read them” or “Most students can understand written texts with unfamiliar words even if they don’t have a good grasp of phonics” or “Yes” to “Phonics instruction is not useful for all children who are struggling to learn to read.” Each bar represents the percentage of teachers who reported holding at least one inaccurate belief.  $N = 1,483$ . Asterisks (\*) indicate a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between elementary grade and middle grade teachers. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

FIGURE 5

Primary Source of Teachers’ Knowledge About How Students Learn to Read



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “Where did you learn most of what you know about reading?” Each bar represents the percentage of teachers who selected the given source of knowledge.  $N = 1,469$ . Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

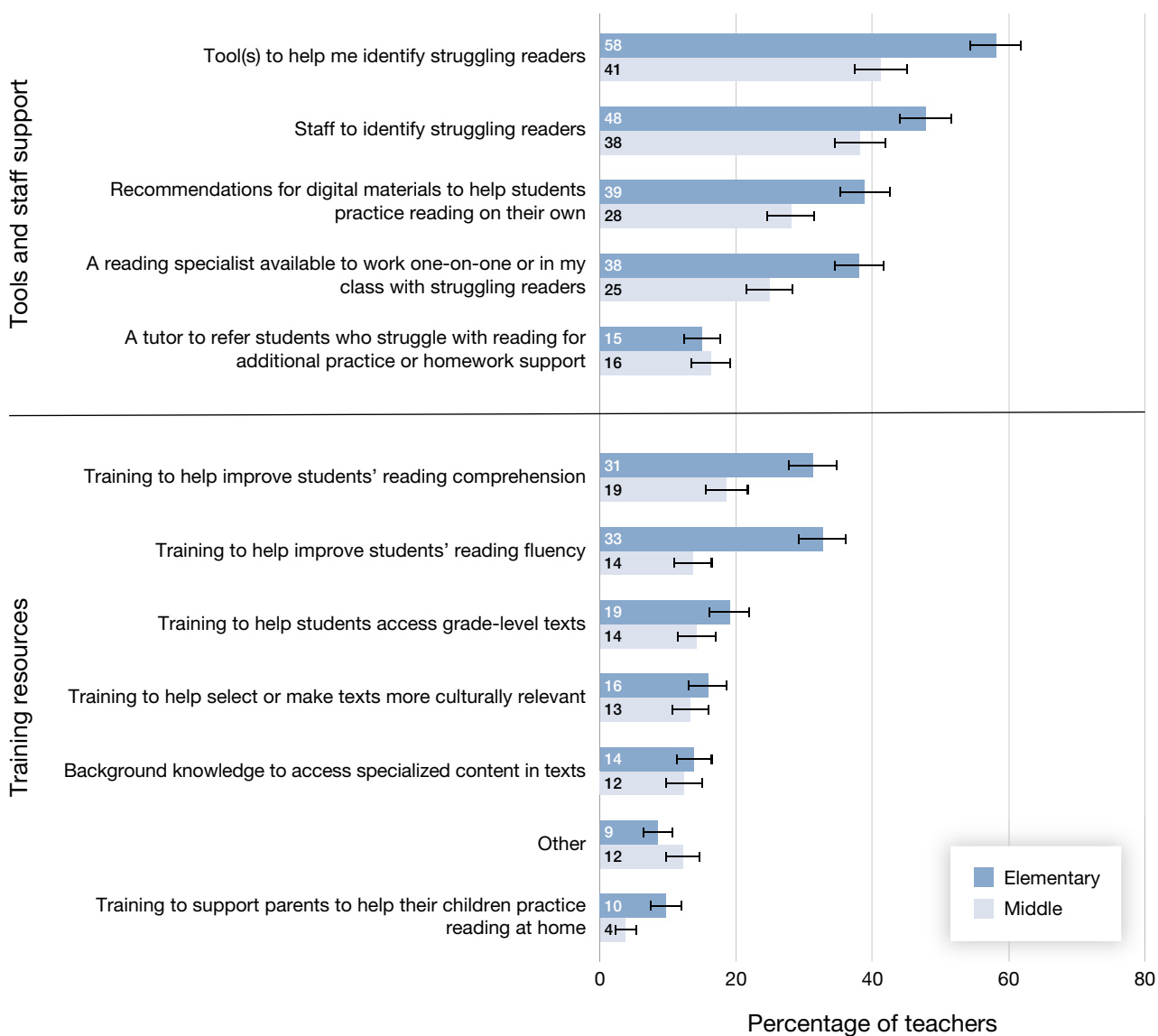


reading instruction. Figure 6 shows the percentage of teachers who reported having access to each of these resources. Elementary teachers were more likely to report having access to any of these resources than were middle grade teachers. In particular, over half of elementary teachers (58 percent) reported having access to tools to identify readers who have difficulty, which might include formative assessments

or screening tools that identify students who need reading intervention. In contrast, only 41 percent of middle grade teachers reported having access to tools to identify these readers.

The majority of teachers expressed a need for additional resources in all 11 tools or staff support areas we asked about, regardless of grade level (Figure 7). More than half of teachers reported need-

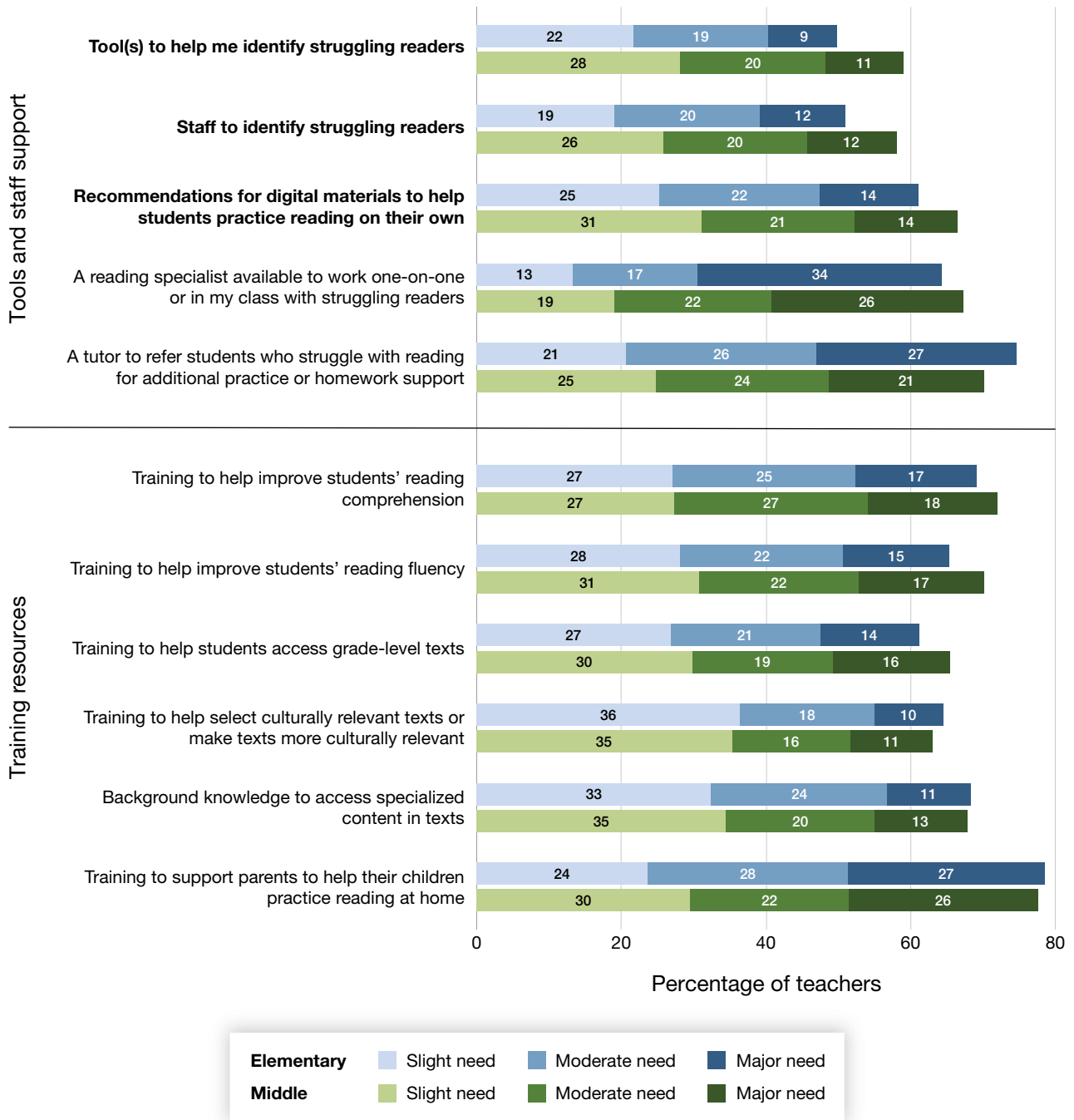
FIGURE 6  
Percentage of Teachers with Access to Tools and Training to Support Students Having Difficulty Reading, by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "Have any of the following resources been provided to you within the current school year (2023–24) to support struggling readers?" Each bar represents the percentage of teachers who reported access to the relevant resource. *N* = 1,469. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

FIGURE 7

Percentage of Teachers Who Need Additional Resources, by Grade Level



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following question: "Please indicate the extent to which you need the following resources from your school or district to better support struggling readers." Each bar represents the percentage of teachers who selected "Slight need," "Moderate need," or "Major need," by grade level. *N* = 1,436–1,442. Bolded text indicates a statistically significant differences (*p* < 0.05) between the percentage of elementary and middle grade teachers who reported any need for the given resource.

ing all five of the tools or staff support that we asked about, particularly reading specialists (64 percent of elementary teachers and 67 percent of middle grade

teachers) and tutors (74 percent of elementary teachers and 70 percent of middle grade teachers); teachers were also most likely to report a major need for both

reading specialists (34 percent of elementary teachers and 26 percent of middle grade teachers) and tutors (27 percent of elementary teachers and 21 percent of middle grade teachers). Roughly two-thirds of teachers reported needing access to at least one of the training resources we asked about, particularly training to support parents working with their students at home (78 percent of elementary teachers and 77 percent of middle grade teachers). Furthermore, more than one-quarter of teachers reported a major need for training to support parents working with their students at home. We found little evidence of differences in teachers' responses about their resource or training needs by school demographic makeup.

## Summary and Implications

As we document in this report, teachers of students in grades 3–8 reported dedicating more than half of their instructional time to activities that require reading and writing. Furthermore, teachers estimated that 44 percent of their students, on average, have difficulty reading the content of their instructional materials. Four out of ten teachers expressed at least one misconception about how children develop skills in decoding words and fluency. Moreover, nearly three-quarters of teachers in our sample reported lacking many of the tools and resources that could support late elementary and middle grade readers.

**In short, our findings suggest that late elementary and middle grade teachers who teach both ELA and other subjects need evidence-based support to improve students' reading skills given the high proportion of their students who have difficulty reading.** These findings align with previous work by RAND researchers that showed that more than half of grade 3–5 teachers and one-quarter or more of middle school teachers reported frequently engaging their students in activities targeting foundational reading skills (Shapiro, Lee, and Woo, 2024). Drawing from these findings, we highlight several areas in which state policymakers and local education agencies should consider how to support teachers of older readers.

First, **teachers in grades 3–8 need more information on the aspects of reading with which their**

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Late elementary and middle grade teachers who teach both ELA and other subjects need evidence-based support to improve students' reading skills.

**students are experiencing difficulty to inform how they modify their instruction to support readers.**

We find that, regardless of student and school characteristics, teachers in grades 3–5 estimate, on average, that 47 percent of their students have difficulty reading instructional materials, with a corresponding 42 percent of students estimated to have difficulty reading instructional materials by middle grade teachers. These results might be an underestimate of the proportion of grade 3–8 students who actually experience reading difficulty; recent NAEP data suggest that 66 percent of 4th grade and 69 percent of 8th grade students performed below NAEP Proficient level in reading (Nation's Report Card, 2022a; Nation's Report Card, 2022b). Identifying the students who are having difficulty and with which reading skills students need help is a first step in supporting teachers of older students with reading difficulties.

Unlike in early elementary grades, very few states allocate specific resources to support diagnostic literacy testing of students for reading difficulties in older grades (Schwartz, 2024). Although teachers of grades 3–8 might have access to their students' state ELA assessment scores from the prior academic year, these data have limited utility for evaluating which skills students might need additional support because summative measures of reading comprehension in the prior year do not provide teachers with up-to-date information on their students. These state assessments also provide a measure of overall reading comprehension but are not intended to be diagnostic

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## Teachers in grades 3–8 need more knowledge and training on how to help students who are experiencing difficulties with word reading, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

tools; they specifically do not provide any granular information on students' reading skills. In fact, evidence suggests that students who score poorly on comprehension assessments do not all share the same skill deficiencies (Morris et al., 2017).

As many states already have for students in early grades, states can provide school districts with resources dedicated to implementing diagnostic literacy assessments for older students. Diagnostic tests can identify students with weaknesses in specific literacy skills and help teachers pinpoint the appropriate scaffolds or whether students need intervention to support word reading skills (Torgesen and Miller, 2009). Diagnostic assessments are also critical to implementation of Response to Intervention or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (Johnson, Pool, and Carter, undated), which can be effective when appropriately adapted to older readers (Vaughn and Fletcher, 2012).

Second, beyond helping teachers identify the specific reading skills that older students need, **teachers in grades 3–8 need more resources to support those readers.** Unsurprisingly, we find that more than half of teachers say that they need all 11 tools or staff support areas we asked about to identify students who have difficulty with reading. Teachers expressed a particular need for additional staff to provide targeted interventions. For example, more than two-thirds of elementary and middle school teachers reported additional need for tutors. These results

reflect a perception among teachers that the task of teaching students in older grades who are behind in their reading development will require intensive and personalized intervention. Evidence suggests that tutoring interventions can be highly effective in elementary grades, although fewer studies have included students in grades 3–5 (Slavin et al., 2011). Positive effects have also been detected in the few studies that have estimated the effectiveness of tutoring among secondary students (Baye et al., 2019). However, evaluations of these types of interventions that identify which components are most effective for older readers are relatively uncommon in secondary schools. Another frequently mentioned resource that teachers reported needing was digital materials that will allow students to practice reading independently. High-quality, developmentally appropriate digital resources can not only extend students' literacy learning opportunities beyond in-class time, but they can also serve as a bridge between teachers and caregivers. Importantly, the resources asked about in our survey represent commonly available resources and are not a comprehensive list of all evidenced-based tools for increasing reading proficiency for older readers. Further investment in designing and testing interventions for older readers is needed.

Third, **teachers in grades 3–8 need more knowledge and training on how to help students who are experiencing difficulties with word reading, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.** Roughly 70 percent of teachers in our national sample say they need training in supporting reading fluency in grades 3–8, reading comprehension, and building background knowledge. Crucially, these results are consistent across late elementary and middle school grade levels and subject matter, which underscores that teachers feel that literacy instruction is the responsibility of all teachers, not just early elementary or ELA teachers (Greenleaf and Heller, 2007). In addition, we find that many teachers in grades 3–8 have at least some misconceptions about how children develop word recognition and fluency. Furthermore, nearly half of teachers say their primary source of knowledge about word reading comes from their own personal experiences in the classroom rather than formal preservice or professional development training. These findings are concerning because these teachers who are unfa-

miliar with how to support word reading also report frequently modifying their instruction to support students with reading difficulties.

Research similarly suggests that primary students and secondary students benefit from additional reading support, particularly vocabulary and comprehension (Foorman and Wanzek, 2016) alongside word reading (Vaughn et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies have indicated that teacher professional development in how to support readers with difficulty reading texts can improve student outcomes among middle and high school students (Basma and Savage, 2023), although identifying the features of effective professional learning remains a challenge across grade levels and disciplines (Asterhan and Lefstein, 2024). States should provide resources to school districts and teacher preparation programs to offer both preservice and in-service opportunities for teachers to learn how to support striving readers across disciplinary contexts. Importantly, however, those preservice and in-service training opportunities to support students with reading difficulties should look different than those provided for early grades reading. For example, simply asking older grade teachers to take the same foundational reading skill training as early grade teachers is not sufficient or appropriate. Instead, teachers of students in later elementary and secondary school grades should receive guidance specific to supporting reading for older students.

## Limitations

There are several limitations to our data and analysis. First, our report relies solely on teachers' self-reported data; we had no means of independently verifying the information that teachers provided. For example, we asked teachers to report the number of minutes of their typical class and then to report the share of minutes spent on reading. Teachers might over- or underestimate the time spent on these activities or interpret the focus of activities that require reading and writing but are not explicitly reading related differently. Furthermore, some teachers might

have considered only instructional minutes when estimating the share of time spent reading or writing, but others might have considered the full class period, including transition time and other non-instructional time.

Second, the survey measures focus on teachers' perceptions, which might not necessarily reflect reality. For example, teachers were asked to estimate the proportion of students in a typical class that struggle with reading the content of their instructional materials. Although we find differences in the share of students estimated by teachers by grade level and subject area, these differences might not reflect differences in the actual prevalence of students who struggle with reading. We cannot verify the extent to which teachers' perceptions of their students' reading struggles align with students' actual reading achievement on standardized assessments. Similarly, we also cannot determine whether teachers' perceptions of their access to reading tools and supports reflect true availability of resources; teachers might not be aware of all resources available to them.

Third, only a little more than 3 percent of our sample of teachers has five or fewer years of experience. More-recent changes to reading instruction policies that have affected professional development and preservice knowledge might not be reflected by the responses of the teachers in our sample, particularly among those who completed their teacher training programs decades before the existing reading reform movement took shape. However, we do not detect differences in the responses of more experienced teachers compared with those with fewer than five years of experience. Although a small sample, this suggests that our findings are applicable to more recently trained teachers as well.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The wording of the item was as follows: "During your typical class, how often do you ask students to read independently?"

<sup>2</sup> The wording of the item was as follows, "For your typical class, what proportion of the homework you assign to students requires them to read or respond to informational texts?"

## How This Analysis Was Conducted

The analyses presented in this report are based on survey items fielded by RAND’s American Teacher Panel (ATP) between October 10, 2023, and November 14, 2023. The ATP, which began in 2014, is a nationally representative panel of public K–12 teachers that currently includes more than 25,000 teachers. Teachers who are recruited to the ATP agree to participate in online surveys multiple times per school year and are provided incentives for completing surveys. The sampling frame for recruiting teachers to the panel was acquired from Market Data Retrieval, a market-research firm that specializes in education. For more information on how the panel was constructed, see Robbins and Grant (2020).

To conduct this survey, invitations were sent to a random sample of 3,839 grade 3–8 teachers in the ATP. In total, 1,483 teachers completed enough of the survey to receive a weight and are included in the analytic sample (40 percent completion rate).<sup>a</sup> Responses are weighted to produce nationally representative estimates for the target population. The analytic weights used in this analysis are the product of three interim weights: a calibration weight that assigns a weight for each ATP member based on individual- and school-level characteristics to match the characteristics of the national population of public school teachers; a sample selection weight that estimates a teachers’ likelihood of being selected into the survey sample; and a survey response weight that estimates the likelihood of responding to the survey. For more detail on sampling and weighting, see Robbins and Grant (2020).

Respondents to the survey were asked questions about the reading challenges faced by their students, their own understanding of and experience with reading instruction, and the supports available to and needed by teachers to support their students who have difficulty with reading. We used and/or adapted survey items from the following sources: Beachy et al. (2023); Binks-Cantrell, Joshi, and Washburn (2012); EdWeek Research Center (2020); and Griffith and Duffett (2018). Before the survey was fielded to teachers, items were piloted with eight teachers of various subjects across grades 3–8 who took the survey and participated in cognitive interviews that focused on whether the teachers understood or were confused by any questions, as well as whether they would add, subtract, or revise any items we asked based on their own experience. The survey items were revised based on pilot teacher input.

To anchor many of the items on the survey, teachers were asked to “Think about the first academic class of students you teach most days of each week (i.e., not including homeroom or nonacademic subjects). If you are an elementary school teacher of all subjects, think about the first subject you teach most days of a typical week.” This item was used to identify the subject matter of the instructional time about which teachers were reporting.

To compare responses by the subject matter about which teachers were reporting, we coded the responses to the following item, “What is the name of that typical class [e.g., ‘first period general math’; ‘science’; or ‘social studies block’].” Teachers who provided a name that included “ELA,” “English,” “reading,” “writing,” and/or “literacy,” were categorized as responding about ELA instructional time ( $n = 571$ ). All other teachers were categorized as responding about “non-ELA” instructional time ( $n = 912$ ). In this report, we also compare the responses of teachers of elementary grades (grades 3–5) and middle grades (grades 6–8). Teachers were categorized as *elementary* if they taught any grades 3–5. An additional 43 teachers who also taught grade 6 but identified their main subject as “elementary education” were categorized as *elementary*. All other teachers were categorized as *middle* ( $n = 724$ ). Within grade band groups, 45 percent of elementary grade teachers ( $n = 348$ ) and 31 percent of middle grade teachers ( $n = 223$ ) reported about ELA instructional time .

<sup>a</sup> The American Educator Panels report the “completion rate” for each survey (rather than “response rate”). *Completion rate* is defined as the (Completed + Partial Surveys) / (Complete + Partial Surveys + Refusal and Breakoff + Non-Contact + Other Non-Response), following conventions defined by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2016).

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## About This Report

This report describes the experiences of teachers in grades 3–8 who work with striving readers, these teachers’ knowledge about reading instruction, and the tools and resources available to or needed by them to support their students in becoming strong readers. Our findings are drawn from survey responses of grade 3–8 teachers who participated in an American Teacher Panel survey. The American Teacher Panel is part of the American Educator Panels (AEP), nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research’s Transparency Initiative.

The findings highlight the importance of including teachers in upper elementary and middle grades in resource development and allocation and offer guidance to policymakers designing or implementing reading instruction reforms.

## Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of RAND that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. This study was supported by the Reading Reimagined program of the Advanced Education Research and Development Fund (AERDF) through funds provided to RAND. AERDF is a national nonprofit dedicated to advancing research and development in PreK–12 education. Founded in 2021, AERDF pursues positive, multigenerational change by unlocking scientific discoveries and creating innovative solutions that improve teaching, learning, and assessment systems within education. For more information on Reading Reimagined please visit <https://aerdf.org/programs/readingreimagined/>. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent views of Reading Reimagined or AERDF.

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