

Evaluation of Reading First in Michigan  
Special Educator Survey Findings  
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The Impact of Michigan's Reading First Program  
On the Knowledge and Practice of Special Education Teachers

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## **Special Educator Survey Findings**

### **The Impact of Michigan's Reading First Program on the Knowledge and Practice of Special Education Teachers**

In the Spring of 2008, researchers at the University of Michigan conducted an online survey of Special Education teachers across the state of Michigan in order to gain some insight into the impact of recent policy changes on the knowledge and practices of Special Education teachers. This is the first of two reports on the results of that study. In this report, we compare the responses of Special Education teachers serving K-3 students in Reading First (RF) and Non-Reading First (NRF) schools on a range of questions related to professional development, caseload and service delivery practices, school climate, and opportunities for collaboration.

#### **Participants**

A total of 236 Special Education teachers completed the online survey via a link provided in the electronic newsletter of two Michigan Teachers' Unions. However, in this report, we consider only the responses from Special Educators who provided services to students in grades K-3, the focus population of the RF initiative. Thus, the comments below are based on responses from 155 teachers, 65 teachers from RF schools and 90 teachers from NRF schools. Responses obtained from secondary teachers and other professionals working in the field of Special Education will be summarized in a separate report.

The two groups of Special Educators, RF and NRF, are comparable in terms of geographical location, professional degrees, years of teaching experience, number of Special Education endorsements, current assignment, or location of work. The average years of teaching experience in Special Education amongst the participants was 13.8 years. The majority of survey participants (73%) reported having a Master's degree. The three most common Special Education endorsements for both groups were Learning Disabilities, Cognitive Impairment and Emotional Impairment. Of the total respondents, 85% reported that their teaching placement was in a Special Education resource room. Of the RF respondents, 84% reported having been an active participant in RF for at least 2 years.

## **Findings**

### *Professional Development*

When asked about opportunities for professional development (PD), 91% of the RF respondents indicated that they had an opportunity during the current academic year to advance their professional knowledge in reading and reading instruction, compared to 78% of NRF respondents. There were significantly more RF Special Education teachers participating in district and school-wide professional development, yet a greater percentage of NRF Special Education teachers attending PD sponsored by a Regional Literacy Training Center and/or Intermediate School District. Despite these differences in access to PD, the two groups did not differ in their perceived benefit of PD. Both RF and NRF Special Educators who participated in PD indicated that it provided them with greater opportunities to work productively with colleagues, deepened their understanding

of reading and reading instruction, and led them to make changes in their professional practice.

### *Caseload and Service Delivery*

RF and NRF teachers did not differ in terms of the size of their caseload, the students they served, and how they provided services to students with special needs. Of the total respondents, 60% indicated that at least half of the students on their caseload were identified as learning disabled in reading. The majority of survey participants (70%) reported providing services only to those students with active IEPs, versus the remaining survey participants (30%), who indicated providing services to both students with IEPs and non-IEP students who are at risk of reading failure. A total of 82% of the Special Educators in both groups reported spending at least half of their instructional time working with students in small-group settings.

In contrast to the above similarities, the RF and NRF teachers differed in their responses to several questions regarding their caseload and service delivery activities. First, there were significant differences between the RF and NRF teachers in their reports of changes over time in the number of Special Education placements in their schools. NRF teachers were more likely to report that the number of students identified as having a reading disability increased over the past 3 years, while RF teachers were more likely to report a decline in the number of students identified as having a reading disability. Both groups indicated being “somewhat satisfied” with their students’ overall progress in reading; however, there was a significant difference in what the two groups of teachers identified

as limiting students' progress in reading. Of the NRF teachers, 45% identified inappropriate instruction in the General Education classroom as a factor impeding students' progress in reading, compared to 19% of RF teachers. In addition, more NRF respondents (19%) indicated limitations in their knowledge of appropriate instructional approaches to reading as a contributing factor hindering students' progress, as compared to RF respondents (5%).

#### *Collaboration between Special Education and General Education Teachers*

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which various issues limited joint efforts between Special Education and General Education teachers. RF teachers were less likely than NRF teachers to agree that lack of familiarity with the General Education curriculum was an obstacle in fostering joint efforts. Also, RF participants were less likely to report that differences between themselves and General Education teachers in their approaches to instruction hindered joint efforts. Lastly, RF teachers were less likely to identify that the inability to create positive interpersonal connections with General Education teachers interfered with promoting joint efforts.

#### **Conclusions**

As a whole, the results from our survey suggest that Reading First, as implemented in Michigan, appears to have had a positive impact on the professional work of Special Educators. Reading First's requirement of districts and schools to provide the same PD for Special Education teachers as for General Educators has had an impact on RF Special Education teacher's self-reported knowledge and practice. The survey results also

suggest that RF Special Educators feel better prepared and report better alignment of instruction provided by General and Special Educators. In addition, in the eyes of these teachers, Reading First, as implemented in Michigan, has provided opportunities for greater collaboration amongst Special Education teachers, General Education teachers and instructional leaders. This collaboration has provided RF teachers with a sense of greater familiarity with the General Education curriculum and a greater awareness of effective literacy instruction, potentially preventing students from later being identified with a reading disability. Unfortunately, our results do not allow us to identify definitively the immediate cause of these changes. However, two prominent possibilities are the increased learning opportunities afforded by the funding of additional professional development activities and the presence of reading coaches and facilitators in RF schools.

**For More Information**

If you have specific questions or comments about the findings, please contact either Addison Stone ([addisons@umich.edu](mailto:addisons@umich.edu)) or Anita Vereb ([avereb@umich.edu](mailto:avereb@umich.edu)).