

EVALUATING BENCHMARK ADVANCE IN HCPS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

An Analysis of Staff and Student Perceptions to Inform Reading Curriculum Decisions

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINAL RESEARCH REPORT

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The Department of Research and Program Evaluation values its collaboration with Hanover Research. This final report incorporates elements of analysis and findings from Hanover, with some modifications made by HCPS to align with the district's specific needs and context.

Introduction

Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, aims to assess the effectiveness of its new reading curriculum, Benchmark Advance, across eleven elementary schools.

This evaluation focuses on understanding the experiences and outcomes of students in these schools during the 2023–2024 school year and beyond. To gather insights into the community’s perceptions of Benchmark Advance, the HCPS Office of Accountability launched staff and student surveys, conducted focus groups, and partnered with the Department of Research and Program Evaluation to analyze the survey responses and focus group feedback.

Relevant data from the Benchmark Advance focus groups with educators, conducted by the Office of Accountability, were analyzed. A narrative summary of the focus group findings, along with relevant supporting quotes, is included in this report.

These questions asked about educators’ perceptions of the effectiveness of Benchmark Advance’s phonics, reading, writing, and word study programs and students’ perceptions of Benchmark Advance’s reading, writing, and word study programs. To address HCPS’ needs, a quantitative analysis of the closed-ended responses was conducted, along with recommendations for HCPS leadership to consider.

The results of this analysis can support district leaders in their decision-making around whether to adopt the Benchmark Advance reading and writing program across all schools or continue using the **Units of Study in Reading, Writing, and Phonics** reading and writing program.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of staff and student surveys, along with feedback from focus groups. The dates for the surveys and focus groups are as follows:

- Staff Survey – March-April 2024
- Focus Group Feedback – April-June 2024
- Student Survey – April-June 2024

Recommendations

1. **Consider conducting in-depth interviews (IDIs) or Focus Groups to gather more insights about the experiences of K-2 educators, special educators, and specialists with Units of Study in Reading, Writing, and Phonics.** Special educators expressed lower satisfaction with Benchmark Advance's programs, especially the phonics and word study programs, compared to other educators. Similarly, specialists were less likely to favorably view Benchmark Advance's phonics and writing programs. This suggests that HCPS could benefit from understanding more about the experiences of special educators and specialists with **Units of Study in Reading, Writing, and Phonics** before deciding on program implementation for these groups. Additionally, while K-2 educators' satisfaction ratings with Benchmark Advance's programs were generally high, they were not as high as those of 3-5 educators. This underscores the need for HCPS to collect more information about K-2 educators' experiences with **Units of Study in Reading, Writing, and Phonics**, possibly through qualitative interviews, before making an implementation decision for this group.

Response to Recommendation 1:

In depth interviews seem warranted based on these initial results. A question could be raised that both reading specialists and special educators who are more highly trained in literacy instruction and practices viewed Benchmark less favorably than classroom teachers.

2. **Enhance professional development (PD) and training support for both teachers and administrators who utilize Benchmark Advance.** Both groups hold mixed perceptions of the PD they received from Benchmark Advance, RELA, and reading specialists. To improve PD, participants desire PD sessions that are better tailored to their needs. Specifically, future PD adjustments could address the specific needs of teachers at different grade levels and subject expertise, focusing on areas like phonics, writing, and digital resource utilization. Participants also suggest scheduling comprehensive and practical PD sessions before the academic year begins to ensure teachers are well-prepared. Many also recommend that HCPS offer ongoing PD that includes hands-on workshops and opportunities for teachers to observe model lessons in action.

Response to Recommendation 2 :

The RELA Office offers this kind of school-based professional learning throughout the school year. Several schools did take advantage of this opportunity during the 2023-2024 school year. At this point, it is up to the school leadership team to request this kind of professional development rather than have a central office mandated visit for this kind of professional learning. It was evident that Benchmark Schools preferred the on-site professional learning. However, the cost of those days was prohibitive to scheduling additional days.

3. **Consider adjusting curriculum pacing and flexibility.** Both teachers and administrators call for HCPS to review and adjust the pacing guides to allow teachers more flexibility, so they can adapt lessons based on student needs and comprehension levels. For example, generally, educators have a positive view of all Benchmark Advance's features, but agree that the quality of its independent reading features could be improved. HCPS should consider implementing buffer periods or flex days within the curriculum to provide additional time for assessment, revision, and enrichment activities.

Response to Recommendation 3:

The RELA Office heard similar feedback during the 2023-2024 school year. In response to this, the pacing guide for use of the curriculum was adjusted for the 2024-2025 school year to allow more time per unit in order to provide greater flexibility to teachers to include flex days to reteach content, address missing prerequisite skills, assess student progress, etc.

Note: The responses to the recommendations were provided by the HCPS Reading/Language Arts (RELA) team.

Analysis of Closed-Ended Responses (Educator Survey)

Methodology

In this section, educators' closed-ended responses to the Benchmark Advance survey are analyzed. Within this section, a narrative on the results of the survey, along with accompanying data visualizations of each question, are included. Each data visualization includes the percent total of survey respondents who "Agree" and "Strongly Agree." Figure 1.1. presents the sample sizes for each educator respondent group.

Figure 1.1: Sample Sizes for Closed-Ended Questions

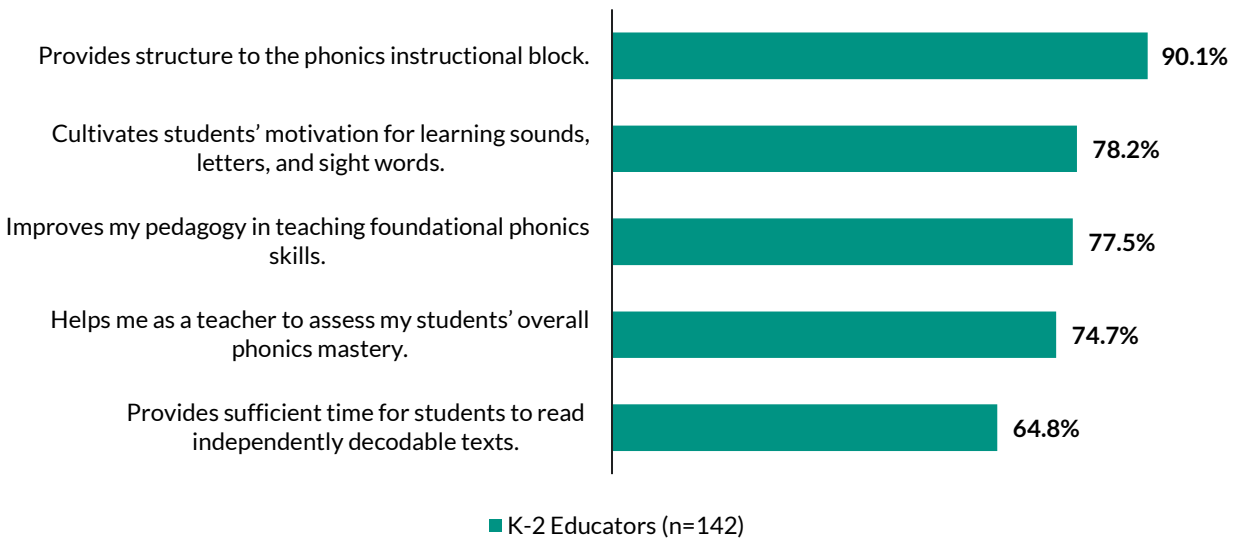
EDUCATOR GROUP	# OF RESPONSES
K-2 Classroom Teachers	142
3-5 Classroom Teachers	92
Special Educators	33
Reading Specialists/Literacy Leaders/Teacher Specialists	27
Administrators	21
Other Positions Not Listed Above	1
Total Responses	316

Phonics Program

1. **Most educators believe Benchmark Advance helps them improve their pedagogy and cultivate students' motivation for learning sounds, letters, and sight words.** While K-2 educators, administrators, and specialists also believe the program offers students sufficient time to read independently decodable texts, special educators are less likely than these other educators to report this.
2. **Generally, administrators perceive Benchmark Advance's phonics features more favorably than other educators.** For example, 95.2 percent of administrators indicate that Benchmark Advance's phonics features improve their pedagogy in teaching foundational phonics skills, compared to 74.1 percent of specialists and 60.5 percent of special educators.
3. **Generally, special educators and specialists view Benchmark Advance's phonics features less favorably than K-2 educators.** For example, 78.2 percent of K-2 educators report that Benchmark Advance's phonics program cultivates students' motivation for learning sounds, letters, and sight words, compared to 74.1 percent of specialists and 57.6 percent of special educators. This indicates that Benchmark Advance's phonics features may be more beneficial for K-2 educators and students than specialists and special educators.

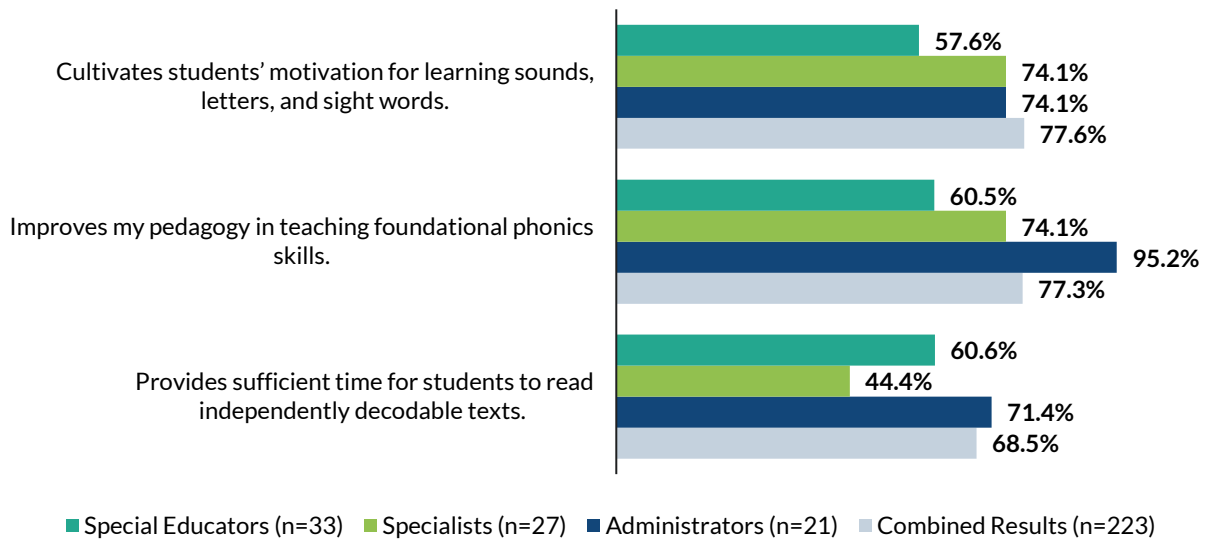
The Benchmark Phonics Program...

% Agree + % Strongly Agree



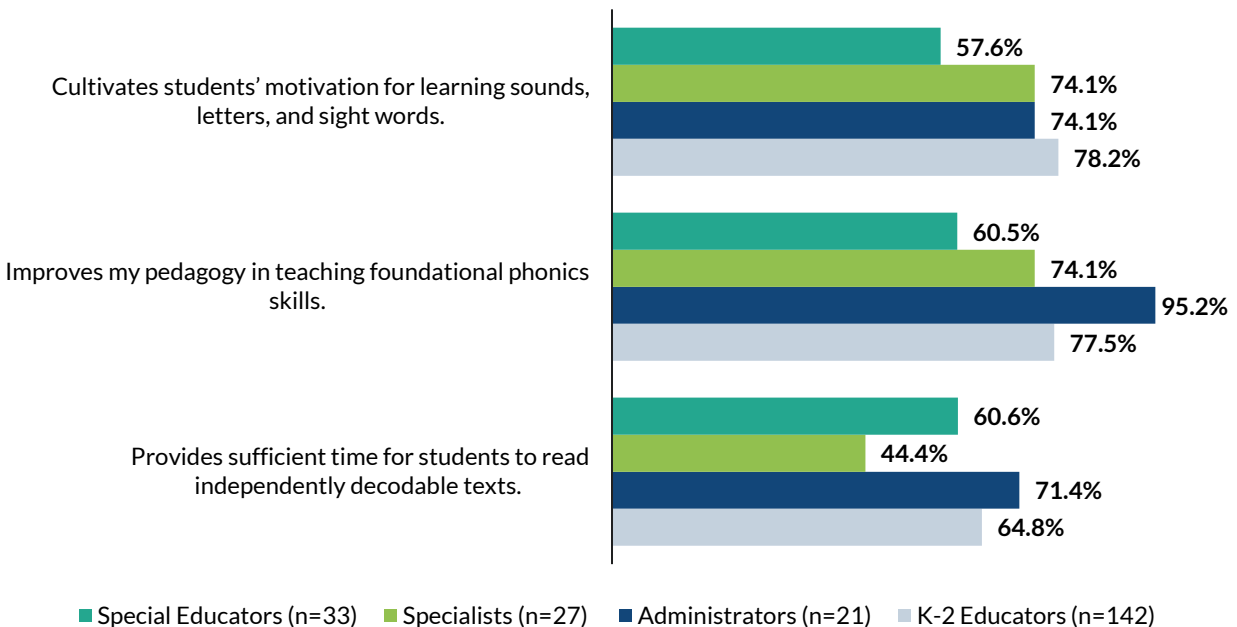
The Benchmark Phonics Program...

% Agree + % Strongly Agree



Phonics Program: Combined Results by Educator Type

% Agree +% Strongly Agree

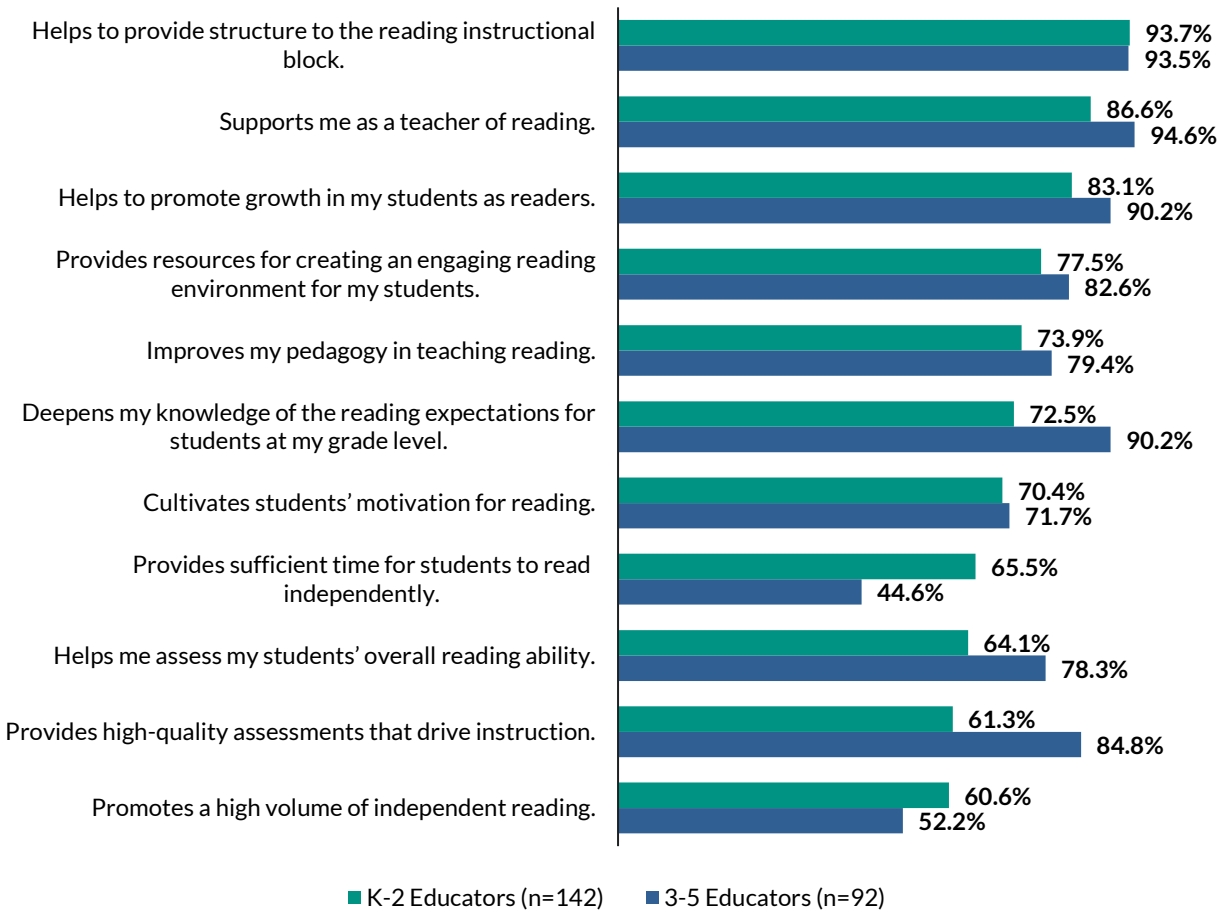


Reading Program

- Both K-2 and 3-5 educators generally hold favorable opinions of Benchmark Advance's reading features.** Specifically, most teachers across the elementary level believe that Benchmark Advance supports them as reading instruction educators, helps provide structure to their instructional practices, provides helpful resources, and deepens their knowledge of reading expectations for students at their grade level. Additionally, educators indicate Benchmark Advance helps foster growth in students' reading abilities and motivation for reading. The results of the student survey seem to suggest that they are not as motivated to read as their teachers may perceive.
- 3-5 educators have more favorable views than K-2 educators of most of Benchmark Advance's features.** For example, 3-5 educators are more likely to indicate Benchmark Advance deepens their knowledge of reading expectations for students in their grade levels (90.2 percent) compared to K-2 educators (72.5 percent). 84.8 percent of 3-5 educators report Benchmark Advance provides high-quality assessments that drive instruction, while only 61.3 percent of K-2 educators indicate the same. Therefore, while over half of K-2 educators hold a favorable view of all features, the Reading program may benefit 3-5 educators more frequently than K-2 educators in some areas.
- K-2 educators hold more favorable opinions than 3-5 educators regarding Benchmark Advance's independent reading options.** 60.6 percent of K-2 educators indicate the program promotes a high volume of independent reading, compared to only 52.2 percent of 3-5 educators. Similarly, 65.5 percent of K-2 educators believe Benchmark Advance provides sufficient time for students to read independently, compared to only 44.6 percent of 3-5 educators. This indicates that while most reading program features may be more beneficial for 3-5 educators, these features may be less useful or robust for these grade levels.
- Special educators, specialists, and administrators tend to view Benchmark Advance's independent reading time less favorably compared to its other features.** These educators' responses to the statement "[Benchmark Advance] provides sufficient time for students to read independently" were lower than their responses to other questions. Special educators were even less likely than specialists and administrators to report this finding, with only 37.0 percent of this group viewing the program's allotted independent reading time favorably.

The Benchmark Reading Program...

% Agree + % Strongly Agree

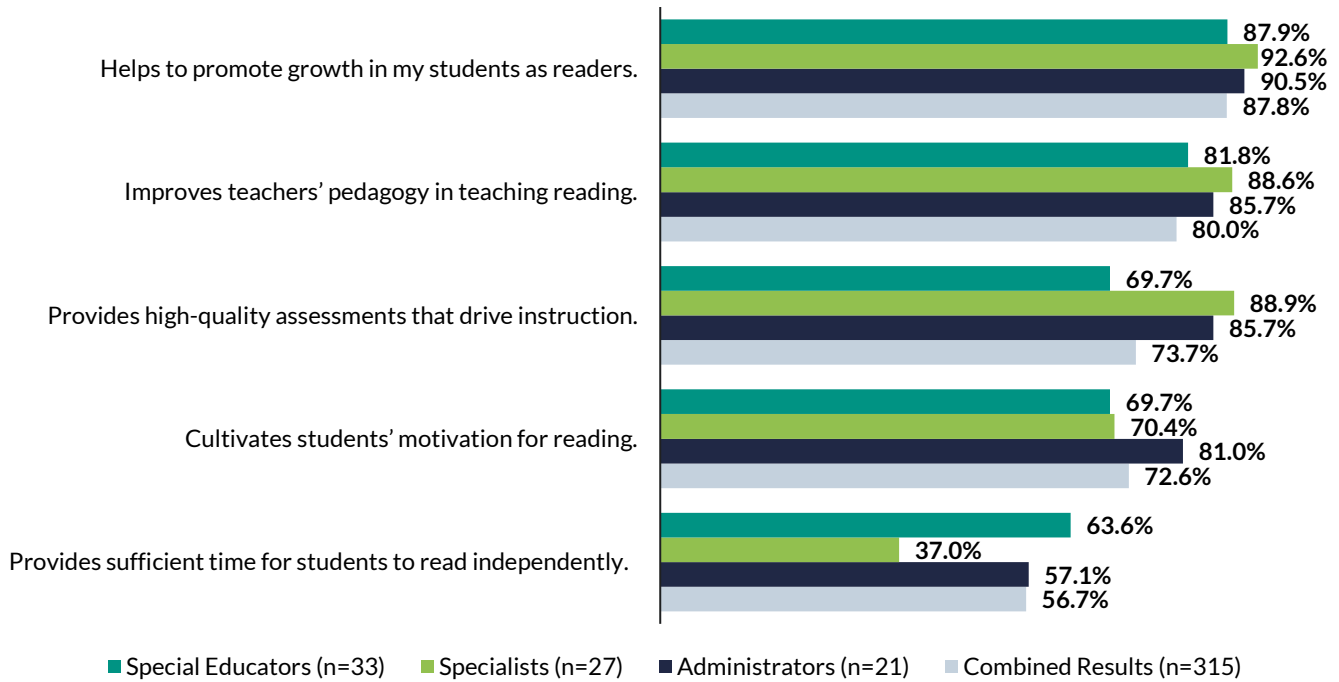


Response from RELA:

The survey results indicate teachers feel supported by the curriculum in terms of resources. At the same time, teachers also indicate that there is not sufficient time for independent reading nor does this program allow for a high volume of independent reading. We will need to consider the value HCPS places on students having time read a high volume of text during reading instructional time in order to transfer taught literacy skills. Research has indicated that, in addition to direct instruction, students need time to apply skills in independent text

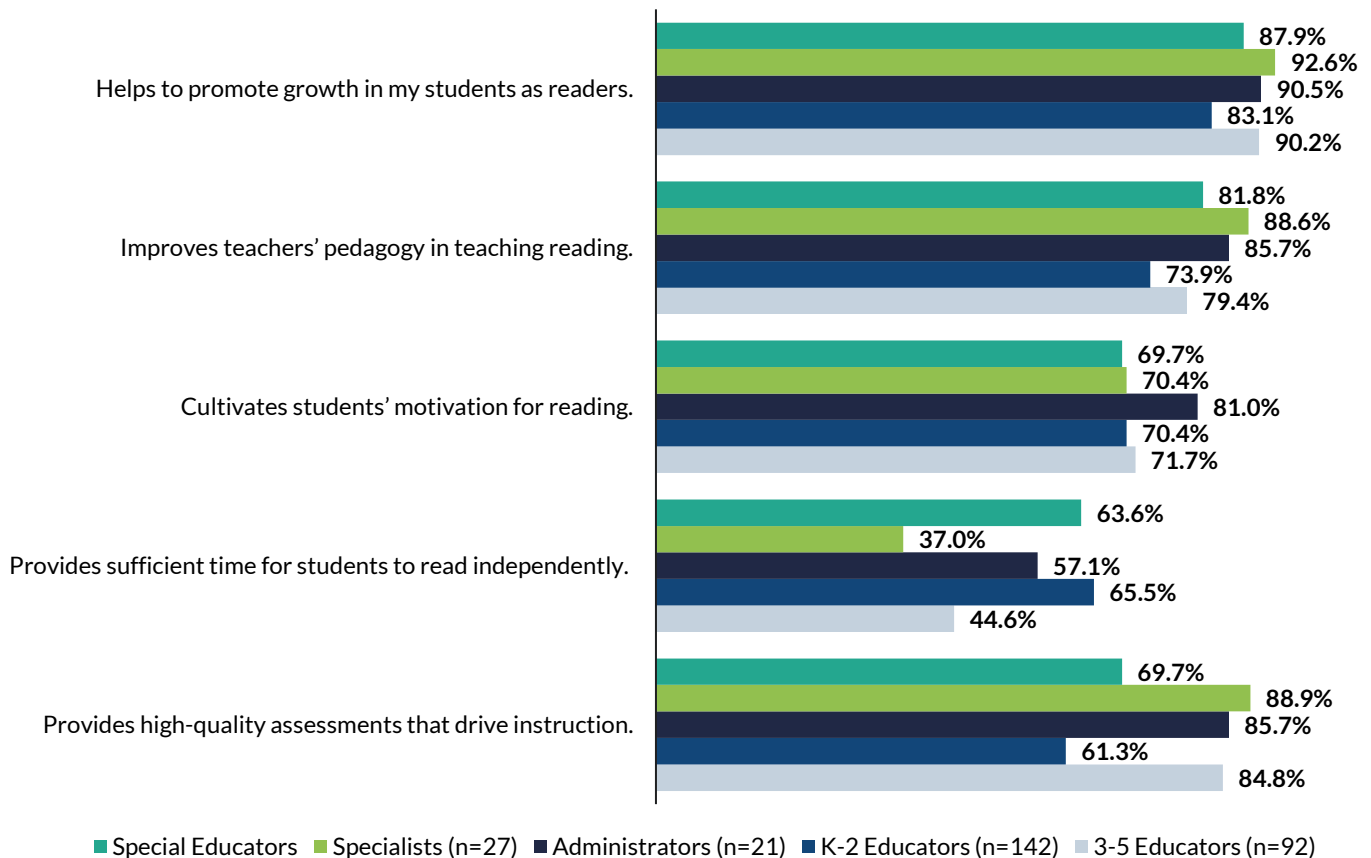
The Benchmark Reading Program...

% Agree + % Strongly Agree



Reading Program: Combined Results by Educator Type

% Agree + % Strongly Agree

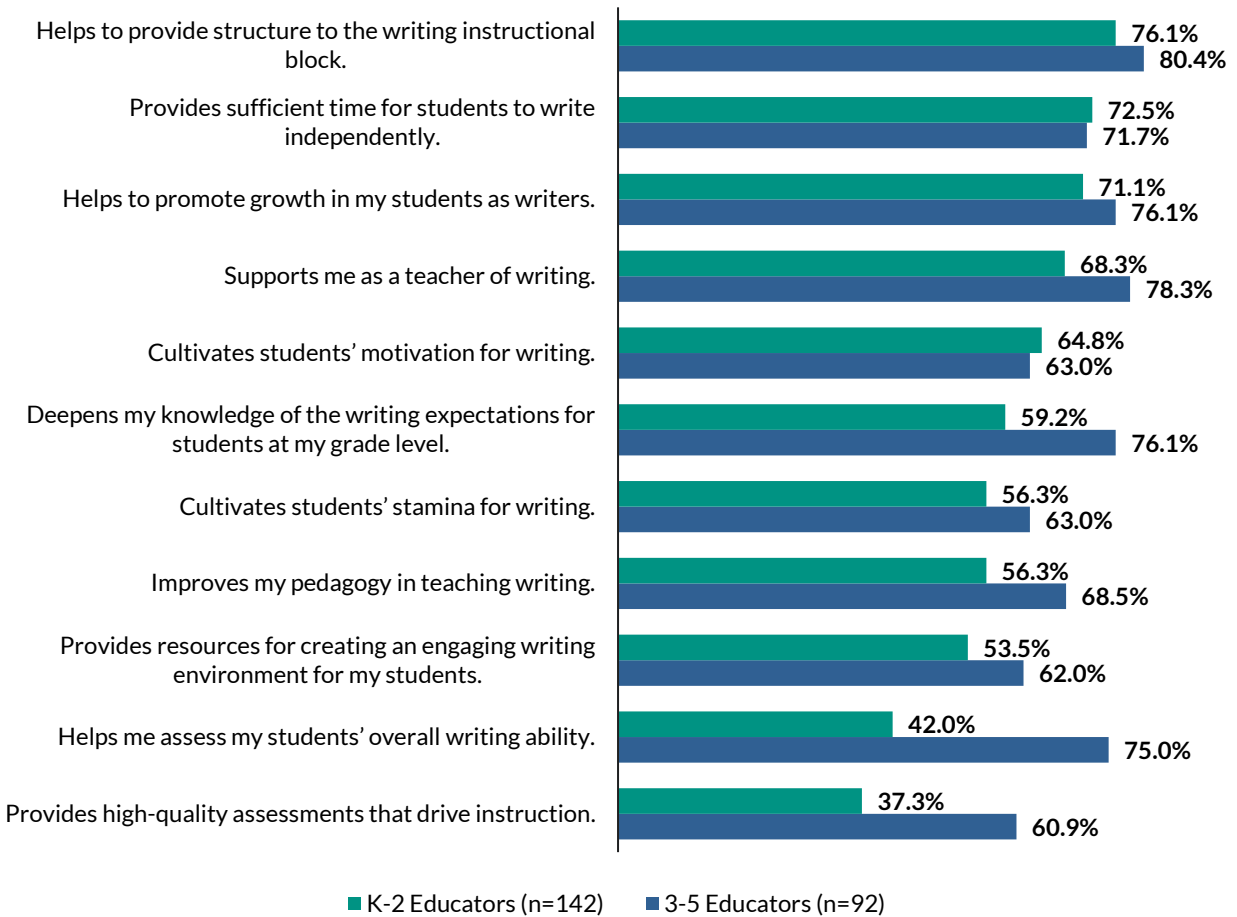


Writing Program

- 1. 3-5 educators are more likely than K-2 educators to perceive Benchmark Advance's writing features favorably.** Specifically, 3-5 educators are more likely than K-2 educators to report that Benchmark Advance's writing features support their writing instruction and help their students develop their writing skills. In contrast, K-2 educators are slightly more likely than 3-5 educators to report that Benchmark Advance's writing program provides sufficient time for students to write independently and cultivates students' motivation for writing. This finding highlights that K-2 educators view the independent writing features of the program more favorably than educators of grades 3-5, mirroring their sentiments towards Benchmark Advance's independent reading features.
- 2. Administrators have more favorable opinions of Benchmark Advance's reading program than other educators.** Much like the phonics program, administrators are more likely to perceive Benchmark Advance's writing program favorably compared to all other educators. For example, 95.2 percent of administrators state that Benchmark Advance helps to promote growth in students as writers, compared to 71.1 percent of K-2 educators, 76.1 percent of 3-5 educators, 63.6 percent of special educators, and 63.0 percent of specialists. This may indicate that administrators have a higher perception than other educators of the value of Benchmark Advance's writing features.
- 3. Specialists view all of Benchmark Advance's writing features less favorably than other educators.** Specialists' ratings of Benchmark Advance's writing features are lowest for those related to independent writing time, providing high-quality assessments, and cultivating students' motivation for writing. This may indicate Benchmark Advance's assessments are less likely to meet the needs of students requiring specialized writing instruction. For example, just over one-fourth of specialists (25.9 percent) indicate Benchmark Advance provides high-quality assessments that help drive instruction, compared to nearly four-in-ten K-2 educators, over six-in-ten 3-5 educators, almost half of special educators (48.5 percent), and more than three-quarters of administrators (81.0 percent).

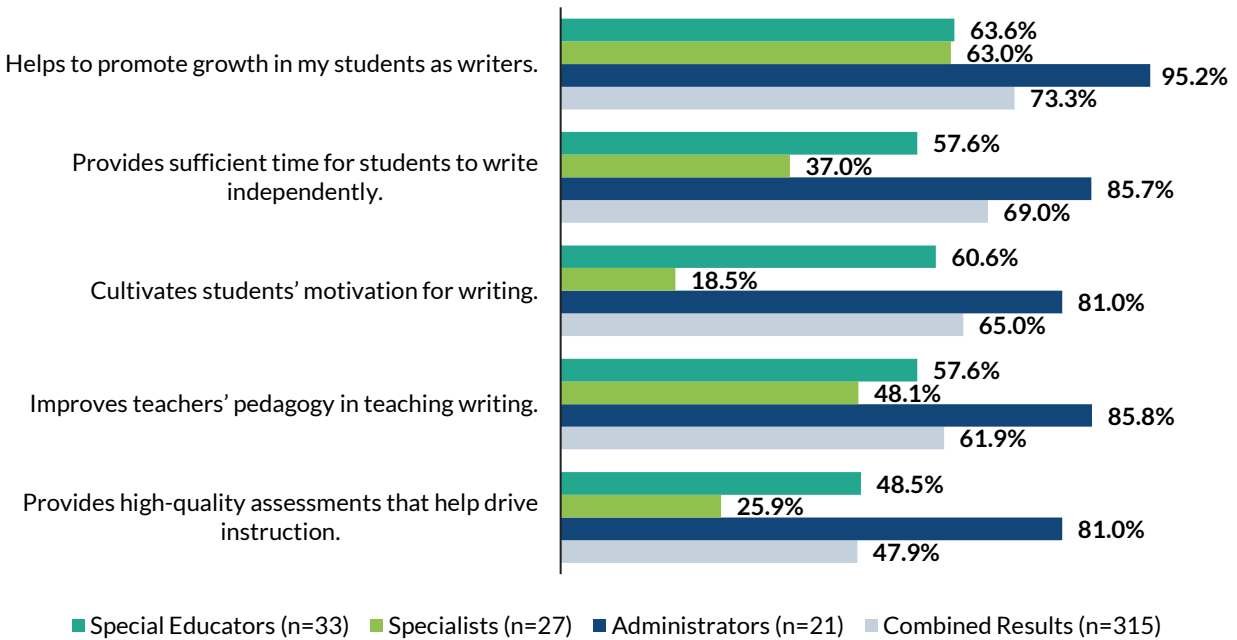
The Benchmark Writing Program...

% Agree + % Strongly Agree



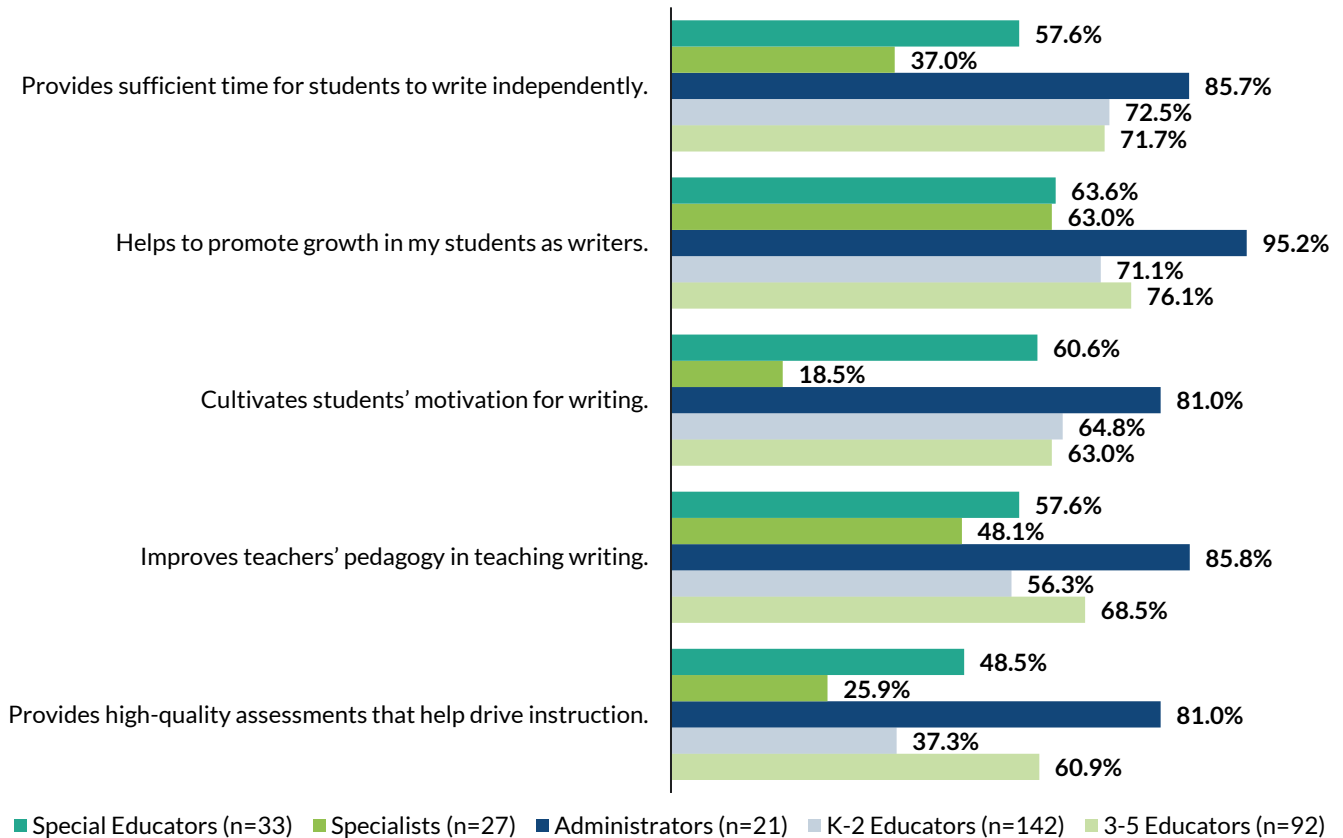
The Benchmark Writing Program...

% Agree + % Strongly Agree



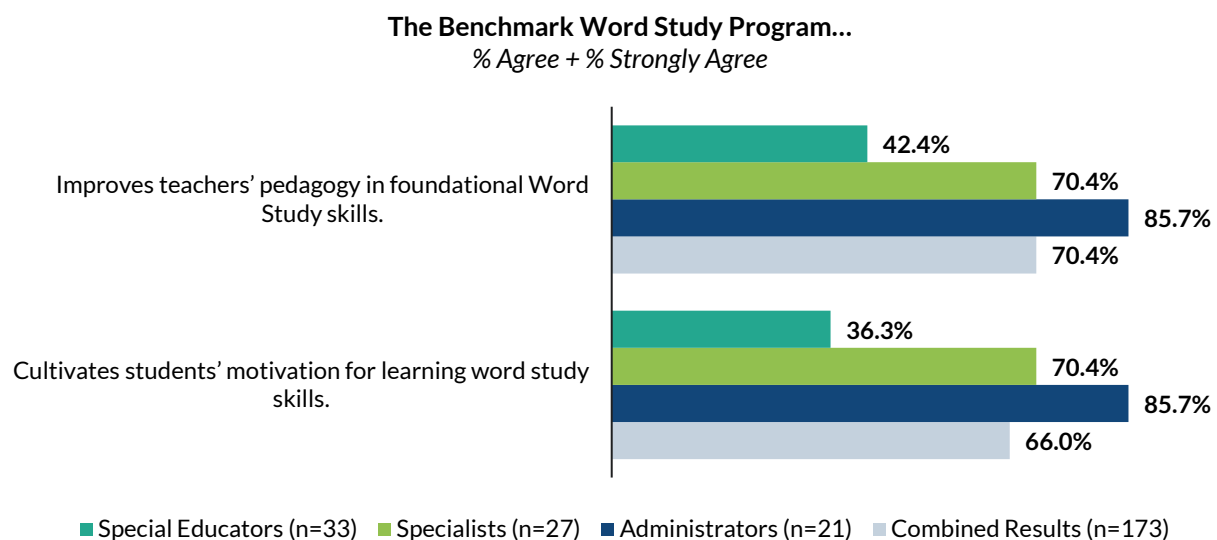
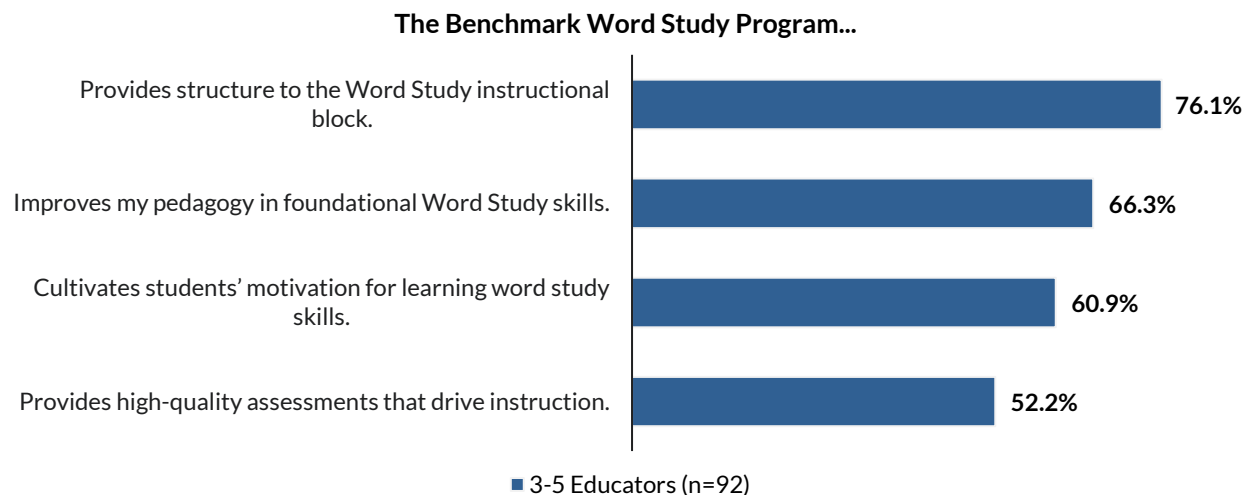
Writing Program: Combined Results by Educator Type

% Agree + % Strongly Agree



Word Study Program

1. **Generally, 3-5 educators view Benchmark Advance's word study program favorably.** Over half (52.2 percent) indicate it provides high-quality assessments that drive instruction and more than six-in-ten (60.9 percent) report it cultivates students' motivation for learning word study skills. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of educators (66.3) indicate the word study program improves their word study pedagogy, and over three-quarters (76.1 percent) state it provides structure to the instructional block. These findings highlight that Benchmark Advance supports 3-5 educators' word study instructional practices and students' skill development.
2. **Administrators perceive Benchmark Advance's word study features more favorably than other educators.** This finding follows the trend of administrators having more favorable views of Benchmark Advance's phonics and writing programs compared to other educators. For example, 85.7 percent of administrators indicate the word study program improves teachers' pedagogy in foundational word study skills, compared to 70.4 percent of specialists and 42.4 percent of special educators.
3. **Special educators perceive Word Study features less favorably than other educators.** For example, only 36.3 percent of special educators say the program cultivates students' motivation for learning word study skills, compared to 85.7 percent of administrators, 70.4 percent of specialists, and 60.9 percent of 3-5 educators. This indicates that the word study program may not be able to meet the unique needs of students in special education and special educators.



Analysis of Closed-Ended Responses (Student Survey)

Methodology

In this section, students in grades 3-5’s closed-ended responses to the Benchmark Advance survey are analyzed. Within this section, a narrative on the results of the survey, along with accompanying data visualizations of each question, are included. Each data visualization includes the percent total of survey respondents who “Agree” and “Strongly Agree.” Figure 2.1 presents the sample sizes for each student respondent group.

Figure 2.1: Sample Sizes for Closed-Ended Questions

STUDENT GROUP	# OF RESPONSES
Grade 3 Students	573
Grade 4 Students	532
Grade 5 Students	566
Total Responses	1,671

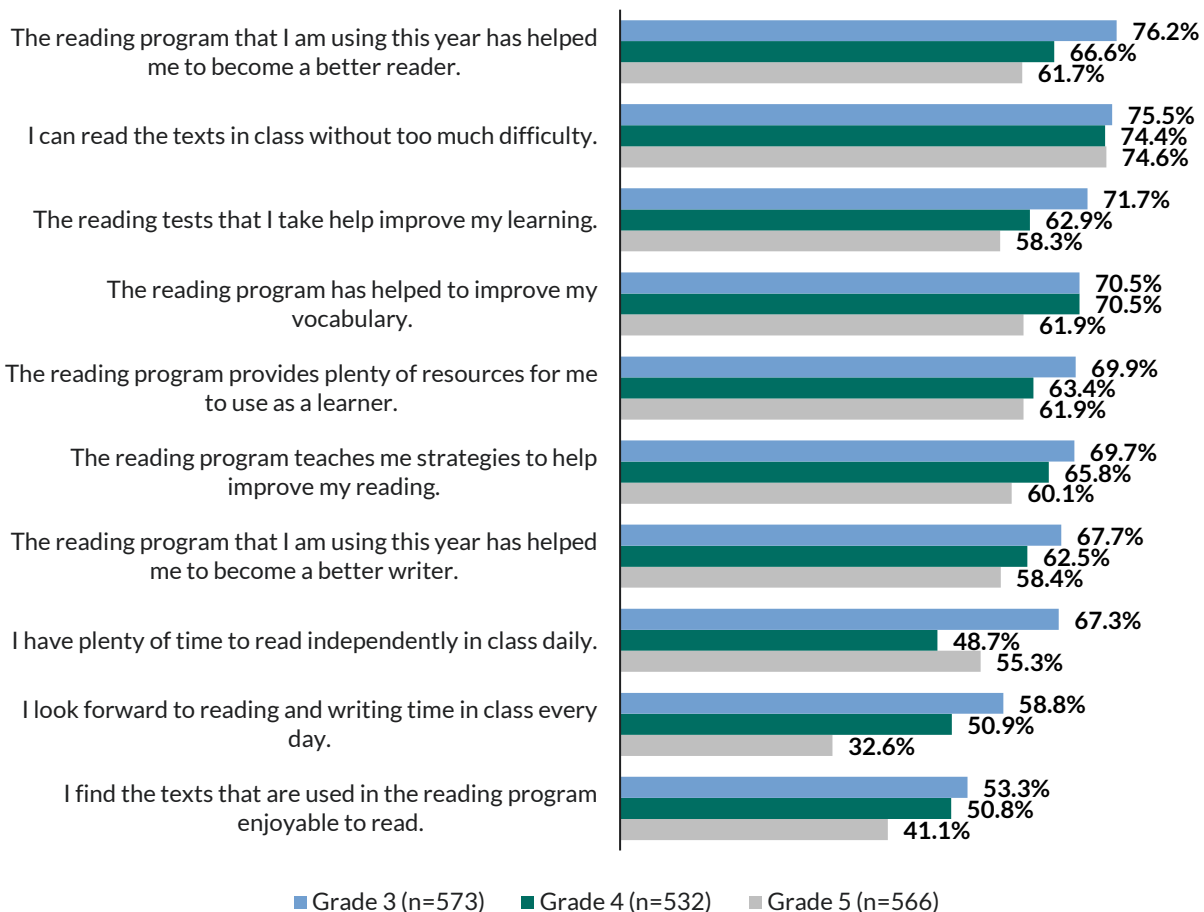
- **Students in Grades 3-5 generally find the Benchmark Advance’s programs beneficial for their learning, but they express enjoyment of the program less often.** For example, just over two-thirds of students in Grades 3-5 (68.2 percent) indicate this program has helped them become better readers (68.2) and improve their vocabulary (67.6 percent). However, less than half of these students find the reading program’s texts enjoyable (48.4 percent) and look forward to reading and writing time in class every day (47.4 percent).

Response from RELA:
Based on the student survey results, it seemed that students felt like they were learning writing skills. HCPS will need to determine if motivation and enjoyment of reading and writing should be considered as the survey results indicate a lower percentage of students agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements related to these criteria. It is interesting to note that the grade level with the lowest percentage of motivation and enjoyment is grade 5 students. Could it be concluded that these students had more experience with the Units of Study curriculum so they are able to make a more informed comparison than students in grade 3.

Results from Students in Grades 3-5
% Agree + % Strongly Agree



Combined Results by Grade Level
% Agree + % Strongly Agree



Analysis of Focus Group Data

Methodology

In this section, notes from the eighty-one (81) Benchmark Advance focus groups are analyzed. Within this section, a narrative on the results of the focus group sessions, along with accompanying relevant quotes, are included. Figure 3.1 presents the sample sizes for each educator respondent group.

Figure 3.1: Focus Group Participant Groups

EDUCATOR GROUP	# OF PARTICIPANTS
K-2 Classroom Teachers	125
3-5 Classroom Teachers	91
Reading Specialists/Literacy Leaders/Teacher Specialists	34
Mixed K-5 Classroom Teacher*	30
Administrators	24
Special Educators	22
Total Participants	326

Note (*): "Mixed K-5 Classroom Teacher" refers to focus groups that contained participants across Grades K-5 rather than within grade band groups (e.g., Grades K-2, Grades 3-5). Additionally, "Mixed" applies to focus groups where the available notes on specific participants were incomplete.

Theme #1: Overall Perceptions

Strengths

The Benchmark Advance program has been generally well-received by both administrators and teachers. Participants recognize the program for its structured approach, integration of phonics, reading, and writing, and its alignment with standards. They also mention Benchmark Advance's engaging materials, like magazines and online resources, and how it supports different learning styles with digital and paper-based options. Overall, participants generally see the Benchmark Advance program as an improvement over previous curricula and a program that provides a structured, resource-rich environment.

Areas of Improvement

However, participants also find room for improvement in pacing, engagement, and support to better meet the needs of all students. Many participants also found the program overwhelming initially and felt that some units were less engaging than others.

By Role

- **Teachers have mixed positive feelings about the program.** Some teachers express a fondness for the program and have observed improvements in student engagement and stamina for reading and writing. While teachers appreciate Benchmark Advance's structure and resources, they found the roll-out to be overwhelming and complex. They suggest more professional development and time to explore resources, as well as more opportunities for small group instruction.
- **Administrators indicate a general satisfaction with the program's implementation and its impact on student learning. However, they also note some challenges,** such as an initially overwhelming number of resources, a platform that is not always user-friendly, and some misalignment in phonics materials. For future implementation, suggestions include providing guidance on pacing and use of assessments, and warning schools about the volume of materials they will receive.

Sample Quotes from Focus Group Notes	
Teachers	Administrators
<i>"Teachers prefer this curriculum to previous; very skill-based; they feel that they are better able to teach."</i> – Notes from JOES Teacher Focus Group (Grade 3-5)	<i>"The staff is so much happier with this program over the previous program. Staff feels like they can understand this program and support students better."</i> – Notes from FLES Admin Focus Group
<i>"This curriculum seems to be made for test-prep. We need to see several years of this program to notice an improve in scores."</i> – Notes from FHES Teacher Focus Group (Mixed FG)	<i>"Program is consistent and easily understood; teachers don't need to reinvent."</i> – Notes from OPES Admin Focus Group
<i>"General pacing of lessons is difficult to make everything fit into time block."</i> – Notes from FHES Teacher Focus Group (Mixed FG)	<i>"Guidance on pacing – too tight."</i> – Notes from MVES Admin Focus Group
<i>"Teachers felt overwhelmed and needed to work through what was most essential in the beginning of the year."</i> – Notes from FLES Teacher Focus Group (Grade 3-5)	<i>"Set manageable goals for each quarter. The program can be overwhelming."</i> – Notes from NBES Admin Focus Group
<i>"Teachers feel like students are making significant growth and want to keep it."</i> – Notes from MVES Teacher Focus Group (Mixed FG)	<i>"Struggling to rising learners are benefitted, while higher-achieving learners are not getting the same benefits as previous curriculum."</i> – Notes from CCES Admin Focus Group

Theme #2: Ability to Meet Students' Needs

Strengths

Both teachers and administrators name the spiraling curriculum, explicit instruction, effective phonics instruction, and comprehensive resources as strengths of the Benchmark Advance program. Participants perceive that the program's focus on vocabulary and writing in response to reading has had a positive impact on students' reading and writing abilities. Many mention how they have seen improvements in student spelling, writing skills, reading growth, phonic awareness, and annotation skills.

Participants also highlight Benchmark Advance's structured approach and alignment of assessments with taught standards as strengths. Some participants share that their students have tested out of intervention programs as a result of using Benchmark Advance.

Areas of Improvement

Notably, perceptions are extremely mixed among participants on whether students' reading and writing stamina, motivation, and engagement have been enhanced by the program. Some participants have seen great improvements in students' stamina, while others note a decline in stamina and independent thought. Perceptions can vary between school site, grade level, and even classroom teacher; for example, one Grade 4 teacher focus group at CCES notes low stamina in both reading and writing, but another Grade 4 focus group at the same site notes only decreased stamina in reading and increased in writing stamina. Several participants credit this decline to the program's lack of independent reading time and student choice; moreover, they perceive that students struggle with units that do not align with their interests. Others note the complexity of some texts and the lack of reading organizers.

Participants have sometimes described the program as "overwhelming," referencing content volume, difficulty, and pace. These include assumptions about students' background knowledge, challenging vocabulary for lower-level readers, and inappropriate levels of writing mentor texts. Some participants find the phonics curriculum to be too difficult for some students, and the pacing of the program can be considered too fast and inflexible, especially for slower readers. The program can be challenging to adjust for students at lower grade levels, requiring teachers to differentiate lessons in small groups to meet their needs. Some teachers also felt that the writing workload is too high, particularly as the rigor increases throughout the year, while others find the writing components "underdeveloped."

By Role

- **Teachers acknowledge both the current strengths and weaknesses of Benchmark Advance and its ability to meet students' needs.** Teachers appreciate the structured approach, comprehensive resources, and the integration of phonics, reading, and writing into lessons. Many also appreciate the program's alignment with standards and its systematic approach using engaging materials. However, the program's structure sometimes reduces student engagement and creativity, and the heavy routine limits flexibility in choosing activities.
- **Teachers also share concerns about the pacing and redundancy of the lessons as well as the appropriateness of materials for certain grades.** Specifically, some teachers note that the writing components could be improved and that high-level students and lower-level readers are not adequately challenged or engaged. Despite these challenges, many teachers note that the program has positively impacted students' ability to write in response to reading and enhanced their text analysis skills.
- **Administrators identify explicit skill teaching, engaging materials, comprehensive assessment tools, and strong phonics instruction as the main strengths of the Benchmark Advance program.** Participants say the Benchmark Advance program has led to growth in phonics for Grade K-1 students, improved ability to annotate text, and increased reading and writing stamina and motivation. The program also offers differentiated material, alignment to standards, and reduced planning or preparation time for teachers.
- **Administrators share concerns about Benchmark Advance meeting the diverse needs of all students.** Some note how the program reduces student reading time and variety, while others note that the program benefits struggling to rising learners more than advanced learners. Addressing both of these areas could improve student engagement.

Sample Quotes From Focus Group Notes	
Teachers	Administrators
<p><i>"The biggest weakness is writing... The writing is stretched out for three weeks. We need to have smaller pieces and not stretch it out so long.... It's difficult to keep students engaged for writing a piece for three weeks. Less than half is somewhat too difficult."</i></p> <p>- Notes from NBES Teacher Focus Group (Grade K-2)</p>	<p><i>"We have seen growth with formal assessments (RI, DIBELS). We were able to move more students out of interventions this year compared to previous years. Teachers can see where students are since the standards are so clear."</i></p> <p>- Notes from MAES Admin Focus Group</p>
<p><i>"I like the mix between non-fiction and fiction which keeps the engagement high....Some of the stories are horrible for stories because they are boring."</i></p> <p>- Notes from HDES Teacher Focus Group (Grade K-2)</p>	<p><i>"Strong metacognition strategies are explicit and repetitive throughout multiple units (spiraled nature of curriculum); and students are able to discuss metacognition strategies... Writing is lacking; teachers have had to build in lots of supports."</i></p> <p>- Notes from JOES Admin Focus Group</p>
<p><i>"Ability to scaffold materials is beneficial and much better than previous program... Difficult to go from a program where students had SO much choice to a program where there is so little choice."</i></p> <p>- Notes from DFES Teacher Focus Group (Grade 3-5)</p>	<p><i>"All stories are read multiple times for different purposes and are engaging Students like the stories... Special educators have expressed concern around finding resources for students below grade level."</i></p> <p>- Notes from FHES Admin Focus Group</p>
<p><i>"One teacher feels a decrease in reading stamina, while another feels that there has been an increase... Not reading books of choice often... Writing stamina has increased because it is more focused, broken down into manageable pieces that student enjoy doing"</i></p> <p>- Notes from CCES Teacher Focus Group (Grade K-2)</p>	<p><i>"Students spend more time writing in response to reading, give evidence to support... Students miss the opportunity to choose the topics they write about... Kindergarten writing stamina has increased; other grade levels' stamina decreased."</i></p> <p>- Notes from OPES Admin Focus Group</p>

"Phonics program is strong – has all components of science of reading; repetition of skills helps students... Improved decoding, spelling, sight words, annotating, reflecting, finding evidence to support answers, going back to the text, communication, fluency."

– Notes from ABES Teacher Focus Group (Grade K-2)

"Tremendous growth in phonics (in K-1st grade)... Teachers appreciate not needing to search for extra resources because so many materials are included... Online assessments help with test-taking stamina."

– Notes from CCES Admin Focus Group

Professional Development and Training Sessions

Strengths

Some participants appreciate the professional development and training sessions provided by Benchmark Advance, citing the model lessons and data discussions as particularly beneficial. However, many participants wish the Benchmark Advance sessions were more consistent and tailored to the HCPS school system.

Most participants highlight the RELA office and specialists as helpful resources specifically because their hands-on support is more targeted to HCPS teachers' experiences.

Areas of Improvement

Many participants found the initial Benchmark Advance training sessions to be overwhelming and desire a more gradual approach to understanding the units. Some had negative experiences with representatives from Benchmark. Participants call for more comprehensive professional development that provides targeted training sessions on structuring phonics word study, managing small groups, using digital resources, and controlling the lesson pacing.

The support from the Central Office RELA Team was well-received, but some participants suggested more involvement and observation of reading instruction from the Central Office. Teachers suggested that Central Office Leadership take their time going through all of the materials and start with less, then add more components as they become more comfortable. They also suggested that teachers should be given the opportunity to observe veteran teachers.

By Role

- **Teachers hold mixed perceptions of the professional development and training sessions.** Some teachers found the professional development sessions beneficial, particularly the model lessons and the support from the reading specialists and the Central Office RELA Team. Others describe the initial sessions as overwhelming and not sufficiently practical; therefore, they suggest that more professional development sessions should occur at the start of the academic year and that they be divided into multiple sessions. They also express a need for more guidance on lesson structuring and navigating the materials.
- **Administrator perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of professional development vary across schools.** Some administrators appreciated the support from Benchmark Advance representatives and Central Office RELA Team, while others found the support lacking or inconsistent. Some call for more collaboration opportunities, additional support related to assessments, and better-tailored sessions from Benchmark Advance and Central Office RELA Team. Suggestions for future implementation included more focused professional development on Benchmark, opportunities to observe model lessons, and time for teachers to familiarize themselves with the curriculum.

Sample Quotes From Focus Group Notes	
Teachers	Administrators
<p><i>"Reading specialist has provided lots of PD and set up OneNote to share resources and strategies... Benchmark PD modeled small group lesson and answered lots of teacher questions. Would like more PD on how to find additional resources online."</i></p> <p>– Notes from ABES Teacher Focus Group (Grade 3-5)</p>	<p><i>"RELA team has been very helpful, teachers are able to apply learning immediately, visits are planned based on teacher need. School Reading Specialist works with teachers. Michelle from Benchmark was very helpful, down to earth, responsive to teacher needs. Benchmark consultants have gotten on calls with school to work on summer PD goals."</i></p> <p>– Notes from MVES Admin Focus Group</p>
<p><i>"First Benchmark PD (during teacher week) was not good; school reading specialist went over information that they should have learned. Plan weekly with school reading specialists Benchmark PD modeled lessons. No visits/PD from central office RELA."</i></p> <p>– Notes from OPES Teacher Focus Group (Grade 3-5)</p>	<p><i>"RELA office has done planning, model lessons, supported small groups, grouping, standards. Benchmark – Kimberly was very good, provided Google doc for teachers to ask questions, helped teachers feel like they have a focus for using resources without being overwhelmed. Would like Kimberly to do more PD. Benchmark - virtual PD was not good. Reading specialist gave overview of each unit."</i></p> <p>– Notes from FHES Admin Focus Group</p>
<p><i>"Teacher week PD – Benchmark training was not great; overwhelming; School PD (by RELA specialist) was much more helpful. Benchmark PD in January was helpful, hands-on, model lesson."</i></p> <p>– Notes from CCES Teacher Focus Group (Grade 3-5)</p>	<p><i>"Benchmark came out once in October to give a model lesson. They met with all grade levels. The day was tailored based upon what the grade levels want. Benchmark also showed teachers how to pull data... Specialists met with Vicky from the reading office as needed. Reading office calendars were full, so it was difficult to get them in."</i></p> <p>– Notes from FHES Admin Focus Group</p>
<p><i>"Reading specialist has been helpful for navigating the Benchmark Universe. Benchmark PD presented a model lesson. It was helpful for looking at the pacing. Would love to see the flow of the transition during an entire ILA block."</i></p> <p>– Notes from NBES Teacher Focus Group (Grade K-2)</p>	<p><i>"Benchmark PD has been very inconsistent; RELA Office helped to reschedule with different presenter. RELA Office has helped with lab sites and demos. Is it possible to blend PD of iReady and Benchmark topics to show how to use Benchmark. Guidance on pacing – decrease number of units; build in flex days, independent reading, unit celebrations, assessments, inquiry projects."</i></p> <p>– Notes from JOES Admin Focus Group</p>
<p><i>"Trainer came in to model a small group lesson, which was helpful. Optional modules were very general and basically just unpacking the kit. County-wide PD should have been earlier than at the end of teacher week (that was very overwhelming). Quality of Benchmark trainers varied greatly (some great, some not at all helpful) and messages from one trainer to another is not consistent."</i></p> <p>– Notes from DFES Teacher Focus Group (Grade 3-5)</p>	<p><i>"What we get from the reading office is always amazing. Benchmark PD has not always met expectation. Gideon and Vicky have been here about four times. Their work is very specific and intentional. They are responsive to teachers' needs since their PD is very personalized. It has been beneficial for the reading specialist to rely on the reading office. Benchmark was good about giving the resources (technical) but not necessarily providing instructional support."</i></p> <p>– Notes from HDES Admin Focus Group</p>

Appendix

Overall Themes – By School

The following section contains school-specific trends shared between administrators and teachers. The themes are organized by school and under three main categories: 1) Strengths; 2) Areas of Improvement, and; 3) Suggestions Moving Forward.

ABES

ABES Trends	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explicit skill teaching ▪ Useful teacher guides and program structure ▪ Focused phonics instruction improves phonics awareness ▪ Engaging materials (e.g., magazines) ▪ Integration of vocab with social studies and science ▪ Effective admin tools ▪ Positive impact on instructional practices ▪ Growth in reading assessments ▪ Increased motivation and engagement ▪ Improved ability to respond to text and use vocab ▪ Collaborative planning and model lessons from Benchmark Advance, RELA, and reading specialists ▪ Alignment with standards
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mixed perceptions of improvement in student reading volume and reading and writing stamina ▪ Varying levels of student engagement depending on the unit of text; some texts not engaging or accessible for lower- and higher-level learners ▪ More activity variation ▪ Pacing inconsistencies; too much content to cover in SY; both redundant and rushed units ▪ Some content is too advanced ▪ Lack of modeling for reading responses ▪ Need for better assessment tools to track student progress ▪ Mixed perceptions of PD effectiveness
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Focus PD on Benchmark programs, assessments, small group instruction, and real classroom applications ▪ Encourage more collaboration and resource sharing among schools (e.g., provide opportunities to observe model lessons) ▪ Allow time for teachers to explore and understand the curriculum ▪ Resources that cater to both lower-level and advanced learners and promote self-selected reading ▪ Adjust pacing guides to better fit daily and yearly schedules (e.g., reduce the number of units, allow more flexibility)

CCES

CCES Trends	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spiraled curriculum ▪ Phonics and vocabulary instruction has improved students' reading and writing. ▪ Structured and predictable teaching methods ▪ Availability of various resources and materials, including decodables and teacher guides
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Decrease in student engagement and motivation due to lack of choice in reading materials. ▪ Restrictive nature of writing tasks limits student creativity and independence ▪ Inadequate assessment methods and leveling of reading materials ▪ Need more effective and tailored professional development sessions

CCES Trends

Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase student choice in reading materials to boost engagement ▪ Enhance PD to be more specific, practical, and aligned with the school system's needs ▪ Adjust logical pacing of units and improve initial training resource utilization ▪ Incorporate feedback from current users to refine and adapt the program
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DFES

DFES Trends

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Structured and systematic approach to the program, including familiar routines and procedures ▪ Availability of leveled materials, interactive resources, and teaching guides ▪ Variety of activities and materials can engage students (e.g., reader's theater and interactive online resources)
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Student engagement decreases when content is not relevant or “relatable” or when texts are repetitive ▪ Specific concerns about the writing component of the program, including the lack of engaging writing tasks and insufficient scaffolding and support for writing ▪ Need for more in-depth and effective PD
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enhance professional development with more comprehensive training, ideally before the school year starts, to better prepare teachers ▪ Provide teachers with materials during the summer and ensure that some teachers become "master teachers" who have a deeper understanding of the program to support others. ▪ Supplement the curriculum with additional materials to better meet the diverse needs of students, especially in terms of engagement and free reading time

FHES

FHES Trends

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rigorous standards and comprehensive alignment ▪ Integrated phonics and word work ▪ Abundant resources and structured curriculum ▪ Emphasis on writing in response to reading ▪ Diverse texts and characters ▪ Spiral curriculum structure ▪ Enhanced student preparation and skill application
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cumbersome phonics online platform ▪ Insufficient resources for students below grade level ▪ Inadequate space for writing in provided materials ▪ Mentor texts not meeting needs ▪ Desire for customizable assessments ▪ Overly lengthy assessments ▪ Writing program pace and level concerns
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase professional development opportunities ▪ Enhance collaboration and support for assessments ▪ Early and efficient training for program implementation ▪ Customizable assessments and resource-finding support ▪ Practical demonstrations and shared experiences from current users

FLES

FHES Trends	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive curriculum alignment with rigorous standards Integrated phonics and structured word work Abundant resources with a structured curriculum Strong emphasis on writing in response to reading Consistent teaching patterns and cross-curricular connections Spiral curriculum structure enhancing skill application
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges with online phonics platform and mentor texts Insufficient resources for lower-level students and need for customizable assessments Concerns about the pace and level of the writing program Need for more engaging topics and adequate time for small groups and independent reading
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance professional development and provide practical demonstrations Offer more support for assessments and online resources Allow flexibility in resource selection and adaptation Ensure early and efficient training for program implementation Provide more guidance for beginning of the year and small group instruction

HDES

DFES Trends	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structured and routine-based curriculum Strong emphasis on phonics and vocabulary Integration of reading and writing Comprehensive digital resources Spiraling curriculum that revisits skills Cross-curricular connections (science and social studies)
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pacing and scheduling challenges Lack of engaging texts for some students Disjointed connection between reading and writing sessions Insufficient time for independent reading Lengthy and inflexible assessments
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide more PD focused on practical implementation Adjust scheduling to allow for more flexibility and independent reading time Enhance support for higher-level students and enrichment activities Improve the quality and engagement level of texts and materials Streamline assessments and allow for customization

JOES

JOES Trends	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging and varied texts with cross-curricular connections Online and physical resources available Effective scaffolding and support for diverse learning needs Clear, standards-aligned curriculum with explicit instruction Strong focus on grammar and metacognition strategies
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overly fast pacing with little flexibility Insufficient resources and support for writing instruction High-level mentor texts that exceed student abilities Limited opportunities for personal-choice writing

JOES Trends

Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide clear guidance on pacing and allow for flexibility ▪ Offer more comprehensive support and resources for writing ▪ Enhance professional development, preferably in-house ▪ Facilitate sharing of resources and best practices among schools ▪ Ensure assessments are manageable and aligned with teaching goals
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MAES

MAES Trends

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Structured nature of Benchmark program, including clear standards and explicit instruction ▪ Strong emphasis on enhancing writing skills and vocabulary ▪ Effective phonics and phonological awareness skill-building ▪ Increases student engagement and motivation ▪ Good variety of texts and resources are available both online and in print
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Concerns about increasing writing rigor and task appropriateness ▪ Insufficient time for independent reading negatively affects students' reading stamina ▪ Need for better differentiation for varying reading levels, especially for those significantly below grade level ▪ Challenges with integrating assessments and maintaining appropriate pacing ▪ Need for more targeted and practical PD sessions
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide more comprehensive and ongoing PD, especially on the effective use of the program resources ▪ Provide teachers with more time to familiarize themselves with materials and plan vertically across grade levels ▪ Adjust the pacing guide for more assessment flexibility and routine establishment, especially in phonics ▪ Emphasize small group instruction for diverse needs. ▪ Encourage better use of available resources, both online and physical

MVES

MVES Trends

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved phonics and reading skills, especially in early grades ▪ Comprehensive and structured materials ▪ Spiral curriculum for reinforced learning ▪ Increased student engagement and motivation through the use of consistent texts and materials
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pacing and time management; need more flexible pacing guides to cover all materials ▪ Writing program and resources often assume too much prior knowledge or are overwhelming and poorly paced ▪ Technical issues with the website
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More effective and tailored PD, including demonstrations of full lessons ▪ Adjustments to assessments and resources to be less time-consuming and more appropriate for writing and word study ▪ Clearer guidance on program implementation

NBES

NBES Trends	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive and structured program Improvement in writing and phonics skills High student engagement with magazine materials
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical and usability issues with the Benchmark platform and accessing resources Concerns about the appropriateness and complexity of writing tasks and the need for more student examples and better resources. Overwhelming amount of resources and tight pacing
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More effective and tailored PD, including more live demonstrations and practical sessions Adjustments to resources and assessments, include simplifying the resource pool, making assessments more manageable, and providing clearer guidance on using the program effectively Enhanced collaboration and sharing of best practices between schools

OPES

OPES Trends	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explicit instruction and repetition of skills, which helps in building background knowledge and simplifying complex concepts Improved student engagement and interest due to the variety of topics and structured nature of materials Availability of differentiated resources and materials that are aligned with standards Assessments aligned with standards
Areas of Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concerns about pace and appropriateness of phonics at different levels Lack of effective writing prompts and structures Program pacing and structure, including the need for more time for independent reading and less dense scheduling of lesson Quality and timing of professional development
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance comprehensiveness and practicality of PD, including model lessons and strategies for effective implementation Create the ability to customize assessments and adapt the program to better fit the needs of a diverse student population Increase in-school support and resources from reading specialists and central office, additional resources for varied reading and writing levels, and better alignment with science and social studies curricula