EARLY LITERACY CAPSTONE

Prepared for Union County Public Schools

HR HANOVER RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

In October 2021, Union County Public Schools (UCPS) partnered with Hanover to understand the impact of two early literacy programs implemented by select district schools—Jolly Phonics and Orton-Gillingham—on student engagement and learning. As UCPS considers adopting one program districtwide, Hanover conducted three research studies to inform the district's decision-making, surveying and conducting focus groups and in-depth interviews with teachers, instructional support specialists, and school administrators and analyzing student-level data. In this document, Hanover synthesizes findings across the three research studies and outlines recommended next steps for UCPS to implement in response.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

K-12 EDUCATION

METHODOLOGY

Hanover completed three research studies to gain insight into the implementation and impact of early literacy programs in the district.

Early Literacy Survey

October–November 2021

186
Responses

Classroom Teachers (85%)
Literacy Coaches (4%)
School Administrators (11%)

Early Literacy Qualitative Study

January 2022

2
Focus Groups

1 Teacher Session
1 School Administrator Session

7
In-Depth Interviews

5 Teachers
2 Instructional Support Specialists

Early Literacy Data Analysis

January 2022

3
Years of Enrollment & Demographic Data

1
Year of Academic Data

PROGRAM PREFERENCES

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- **Teachers and instructional support specialists advise UCPS to adopt and implement a single early literacy program districtwide.** Focus group participants and interviewees indicate that this decision, if made through an inclusive process based on rigorous criteria, would make teaching and learning more consistent across UCPS schools.

  The selected program should: encompass the five pillars of reading; align with the science of reading; accommodate students' differing abilities; and provide thorough training and resources. Further, UCPS should involve teachers and instructional support specialists in the selection process to ensure the program meets their needs and increase buy-in at the school and classroom levels.

- **Teachers, instructional support specialists, and school administrators prefer Orton-Gillingham over Jolly Phonics.** Survey respondents report higher levels of satisfaction with Orton-Gillingham and credit the program with having a more positive impact on student literacy. Focus group participants and interviewees express similar opinions, also describing the program as more aligned with LETRS and the science of reading and easier to implement due to intensive initial training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopt and implement a single early literacy program across UCPS schools.

Select an early literacy program based on rigorous criteria and input from teachers and instructional support specialists.

Consider districtwide implementation of Orton-Gillingham.

RECOMMEND USING A DISTRICTWIDE EARLY LITERACY PROGRAM

For More Consistent Student Experiences...

"**I want consistency across the district**. I feel like [early literacy] is piecemealed. When a child moves from my school to another school, they have to start over with a different program."

—*Teacher (P9)*
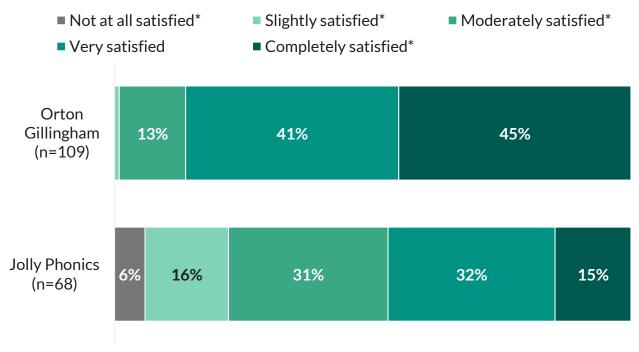
...And More Uniform Classroom Instruction

"We are trying to align all of our systems [and] **it would [be] nice if we had a uniform approach as a district**. If we were all **working together in unity with one plan or process, that would [bring] a lot more cohesion**. I think [it's] just every man for himself."

—*Principal (P12)*

REPORT GREATER SATISFACTION WITH ORTON-GILLINGHAM

Satisfaction with the [Orton-Gillingham/ Jolly Phonics] Literacy Program

- ■ Not at all satisfied*
- ■ Slightly satisfied*
- ■ Moderately satisfied*
- ■ Very satisfied
- ■ Completely satisfied*

Orton Gillingham (n=109)
| 13% | 41% | 45% |

Jolly Phonics (n=68)
| 6% | 16% | 31% | 32% | 15% |

Denotes a statistically-significant difference (95% confidence level) between groups.

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PROGRAM STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

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- **In focus groups and interviews, educators indicate that both programs meet most students' early literacy needs.** While appropriate for most students, both programs appear best suited to younger students and students learning as expected. Educators also appreciate the way both programs scaffold content (e.g., across grade levels) and support instruction of large and small student groups. According to educators, students enjoy the programs' multisensory and interactive approach, enabling them to more actively engage with learning.

- **However, educators report that both programs place insufficient emphasis on key components of literacy instruction. Furthermore, both programs struggle to accommodate the needs of students at both ends of the achievement spectrum.** Focus group participants and interviewees find both programs lacking in the areas of phonetic awareness and decodable text (and, in the case of Orton-Gillingham, comprehension as well). As a result, teachers and instructional support specialists need to source content and materials from other programs to incorporate into either Jolly Phonics or Orton-Gillingham –a time- and labor-intensive process. Both programs also provide neither sufficient support for struggling students, nor sufficiently-engaging content for advanced students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Investigate the feasibility and desirability of developing classroom instructional materials internally or purchasing from a publisher/vendor.

- Assist teachers and instructional support specialists with identifying appropriate interventions and supplementary instructional materials to use with struggling and advanced students, respectively, in classrooms using either Jolly Phonics or Orton-Gillingham.

COMMON STRENGTH ACROSS PROGRAMS

Jolly Phonics and Orton-Gillingham effectively support the early literacy needs of most students. The programs prove especially accessible to younger learners (e.g., Kindergarten students) and students meeting grade-level expectations (i.e., "typical" learners).

"My students don't find [Jolly Phonics] challenging. It gives them a good base. There are just kids who have a hard [time]. They're struggling readers and need extra [help]. The majority of students don't struggle."

—*Teacher (P4)*

"Some of my lower students struggle with their letters, sounds, and blending [but] the majority do well with [Orton-Gillingham]."

—*Teacher (P7)*

COMMON WEAKNESSES ACROSS PROGRAMS

Content Gaps Require Use of Resources from Other Programs

"I've heard from **my teachers** that they **like Jolly Phonics, but** that **they need more**. We've started doing more phonemic awareness to support [students,] and **[we're] also looking at another program that's more robust**."

—*Instructional Support Specialist (P1)*

Less Suited to Struggling, Advanced, and Older Learners

"**Some students were a little ahead of where we were [in] Jolly Phonics**. Some felt like the songs [were] babyish. When you think about Kindergarten, I feel like [it's] probably appropriate."

—*Teacher (P8)*

Outdated Instructional Materials

"I've always said to one of my principals, [and] I talk a lot about this, I say, **"Orton-Gillingham is years and years and years old. Yet it [hasn't] changed**."

—*Teacher (P9)*

PERCEPTIONS OF JOLLY PHONICS

Program Strengths

Intuitive Lesson Structure	Teacher-Friendly	Interactive & Engaging
	Multisensory	
Suitable for Large & Small Groups	Fun	Scaffolded Content Across Grade Levels

"[Jolly Phonics] is very engaging. Students love the songs and the motions. It's very easy for them to learn their sounds based on the program. I feel like it scaffolds very nicely."

—Teacher (P5)

"[A] strength is that it's a whole-group approach to learning but can be incorporated into your small-group centers."

—Teacher (P6)

Program Weaknesses

Not Comprehensive	Lacks Focus on Phonetic Awareness & Decodable Text	Less Suitable for Advanced Learners
Fast Pacing When Introducing Sounds		Need to Add Content, Materials from Other Programs

"The pacing of the introduction of sounds seems to be fast. That can sometimes be considered a negative [based on] my conversations with [teachers]."

—Principal (P11)

PERCEPTIONS OF ORTON-GILLINGHAM

Program Strengths

Well-Organized	**Strong Lessons & Assessments**	**Interactive & Engaging**
	Multisensory	
Suitable for Large & Small Groups	**Supports for Struggling Learners**	**Scaffolded Content Across Grade Levels**

"[Orton-Gillingham] is phenomenal. I like that it gives me a scope and sequence [that] I can also adapt to student needs."

—*Instructional Support Specialist (P2)*

Program Weaknesses

Not Comprehensive	**Lacks Focus on Phonetic Awareness, Decodable Text & Comprehension**	**Less Suitable for Advanced Learners**
Time-Intensive Lesson-Planning		**Need to Add Content, Materials from Other Programs**

The biggest [issue with Orton-Gillingham] is having the materials organized and understanding all the different pieces that need to be in that block of time."

—*Teacher (P3)*

"If there was a downside, it would be that there's no comprehension work. You have to pull that in [separately]. I would say that Orton-Gillingham does a really good job, but comprehension [needs work]."

—*Instructional Support Specialist (P2)*

PROGRAM IMPACT & EFFICACY

PROGRAM IMPACT & EFFICACY

- **Educators credit both programs with increasing student engagement and self-efficacy.** Focus group participants and interviewees note that students enjoy the programs' multisensory format (e.g., the regular use of flip tiles, sand trays, and blending boards, among other items), making them more interested in participating and learning. The programs' repetition of content, meanwhile, builds students' competence and confidence by strengthening fluency and comprehension.

- **Findings from the three studies suggest that both programs improve literacy. Yet, whether one program outperforms the other remains unclear.**

    - Survey respondents are significantly more likely to rate Orton-Gillingham as very or extremely effective in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension than Jolly Phonics. That said, compared with other areas, both programs receive markedly lower effectiveness ratings in vocabulary and comprehension.

    - Focus group participants and interviewees also think, based on observations and test results, that both programs strengthen literacy, referring to fluency, letter recognition, word decoding, and (in contrast to survey respondents) comprehension as areas of the most noticeable improvement.

    - Data for 2020-21 indicate no consistent pattern with respect to students in one program outgrowing students in the other program in K-Grade 2. However, across all three grade levels, students in a literacy program in 2020-21 experienced *less* growth and had *lower* end-of-year mean scores than students not in a literacy program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Examine fidelity of program implementation to assess if differences in program outcomes reflect differences in program quality or differences in program delivery.
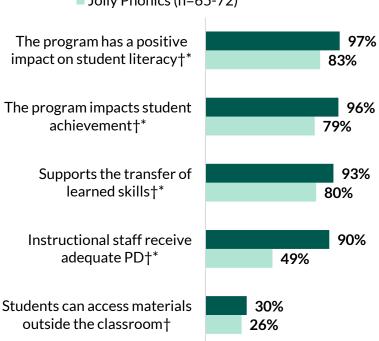
Investigate effective practices used in non-program schools that may reinforce the impact of early literacy programs.

FIND ORTON-GILLINGHAM MORE EFFECTIVE THAN JOLLY PHONICS...

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- Orton Gillingham (n=97-110)
- Jolly Phonics (n=65-72)

Statement	Orton Gillingham	Jolly Phonics
The program has a positive impact on student literacy†*	97%	83%
The program impacts student achievement†*	96%	79%
Supports the transfer of learned skills†*	93%	80%
Instructional staff receive adequate PD†*	90%	49%
Students can access materials outside the classroom†	30%	26%

How effective is the literacy program on the following student outcomes?

% Very + Extremely Useful

- Orton Gillingham (n=102-110)
- Jolly Phonics (n=65-71)

Outcome	Orton Gillingham	Jolly Phonics
Phonemic awareness*	87%	68%
Phonics*	92%	76%
Fluency*	71%	32%
Vocabulary*	51%	20%
Comprehension*	42%	14%

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† Text is truncated for clarity and brevity.
* Denotes a statistically-significant difference (95% confidence level) between groups.

16

...IN PHONEMIC AWARENESS

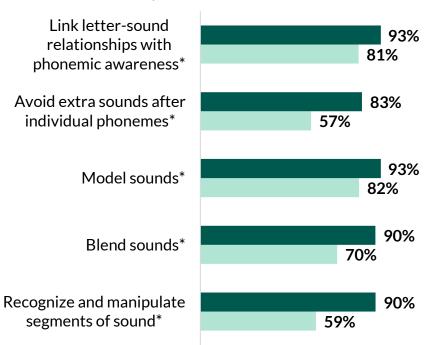## How useful has the [Jolly Phonics/Orton-Gillingham] literacy program been for developing students' ability to...?◊

% Very + Extremely Useful

■ Orton Gillingham (n=106-110)
■ Jolly Phonics (n=58-65)

Category		
Link letter-sound relationships with phonemic awareness*	Orton Gillingham	93%
	Jolly Phonics	81%
Avoid extra sounds after individual phonemes*	Orton Gillingham	83%
	Jolly Phonics	57%
Model sounds*	Orton Gillingham	93%
	Jolly Phonics	82%
Blend sounds*	Orton Gillingham	90%
	Jolly Phonics	70%
Recognize and manipulate segments of sound*	Orton Gillingham	90%
	Jolly Phonics	59%

...IN PHONICS

How useful has the [Jolly Phonics/Orton-Gillingham] literacy program been for teaching the following aspects of phonics?◊

% Very + Extremely Useful

■ Orton Gillingham (n=101-110)
■ Jolly Phonics (n=56-67)

Category		
Synthetic†*	Orton Gillingham	91%
	Jolly Phonics	61%
Spelling†*	Orton Gillingham	90%
	Jolly Phonics	64%
Embedded†*	Orton Gillingham	78%
	Jolly Phonics	44%
Analytic†*	Orton Gillingham	86%
	Jolly Phonics	49%
Analogy†*	Orton Gillingham	58%
	Jolly Phonics	21%

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...IN FLUENCY

How useful has the [Jolly Phonics/Orton-Gillingham] literacy program been for developing students' ability in...?◊
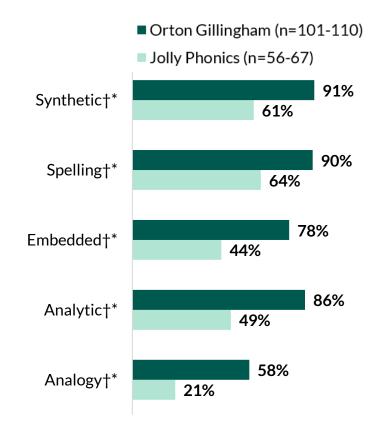
% Very + Extremely Useful

- ■ Orton Gillingham (n=96)
- ■ Jolly Phonics (n=59)

Echo reading†*
- 61%
- 36%

Partner reading†*
- 51%
- 27%

Choral reading†*
- 52%
- 33%

Using technology†*
- 42%
- 15%

Repeated reading†*
- 58%
- 28%

...IN VOCABULARY

How useful has the [Jolly Phonics/Orton-Gillingham] literacy program been for developing students'...?◊

% Very + Extremely Useful

- ■ Orton Gillingham (n=80-85)
- ■ Jolly Phonics (n=48-53)

Knowledge of Latin and/or Greek roots*
- 37%
- 4%

Prefix and Suffix use*
- 59%
- 17%

Academic vocabulary words*
- 44%
- 10%

Narrative language skills*
- 45%
- 16%

Conversation using inferential language*
- 44%
- 12%

◊ Only respondents who selected "slightly effective", "moderately effective", "very effective", "extremely effective", or "Unsure/NA" for "Based on your experience, how effective is the [JP/OG] literacy program on the following student outcomes?" answered this question.
† Text is truncated for clarity and brevity.
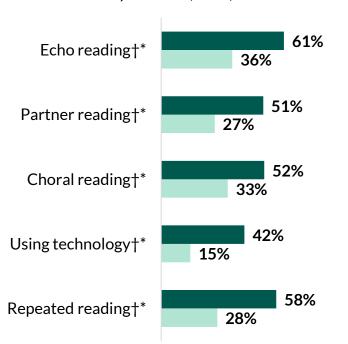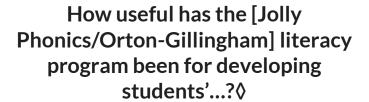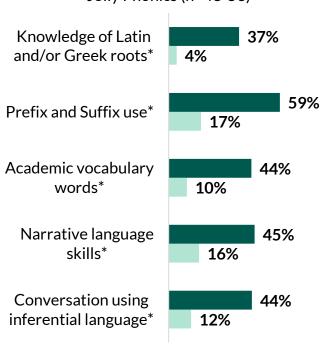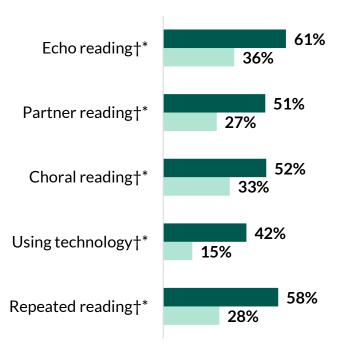* Denotes a statistically-significant difference (95% confidence level) between groups.

...AND IN COMPREHENSION

TEACHER COMMENTS

How useful has the [Jolly Phonics/Orton-Gillingham] literacy program been in the following areas?◊

% Very + Extremely Useful

- ■ Orton Gillingham (n=96)
- ■ Jolly Phonics (n=59)

Area	Orton Gillingham	Jolly Phonics
Echo reading†*	61%	36%
Partner reading†*	51%	27%
Choral reading†*	52%	33%
Using technology†*	42%	15%
Repeated reading†*	58%	28%

"[**Jolly Phonics**] is a solid foundation because [it] teaches the sounds before the letters. [Students] very quickly learn that letters make sounds. They learn to read more quickly [and] their ability to instantly recall [letters and sounds] is very strong."

—*Teacher (P5)*

"I've used [**Orton-Gillingham**] for the last three years and [previously] my children had a hard time learning letters and sound[s]. Their handwriting [and] letter formation[s] [have] improved. As well, my skill with the program has gotten better [and] that helps my students' progress."

—*Teacher (P3)*

◊ *Only respondents who selected "slightly effective", "moderately effective", "very effective", "extremely effective", or "Unsure/NA" for "Based on your experience, how effective is the [JP/OG] literacy program on the following student outcomes?" answered this question.*
* Denotes a statistically-significant difference (95% confidence level) between groups.

PROGRAM TRAINING & RESOURCES

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- **Teachers and instructional support specialists felt better prepared to implement Orton-Gillingham than Jolly Phonics.** Focus group participants and interviewees note a lack of initial training on Jolly Phonics, leaving them heavily reliant on publisher resources when introducing the program in the classroom. As Jolly Phonics users received training, however, their confidence in their ability to implement the program grew. In contrast, Orton-Gillingham users felt comfortable with their program much sooner due to the intensive training provided at the outset.

- **Teachers and instructional support specialists find the supplementary resources provided by the Jolly Phonics and Orton-Gillingham programs lacking.** Fewer than one-third of survey respondents report that students can access program materials outside the classroom, although slightly more consider Orton-Gillingham's materials more accessible than Jolly Phonics' materials. Focus group participants and interviewees perceive both programs' materials as lacking for substantive reasons as well, noting the need to incorporate resources from other programs that prove more up-to-date or address key components Orton-Gillingham than Jolly Phonics do not fully address.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Examine fidelity of implementation to assess if differences in program outcomes reflect differences in program quality or differences in fidelity of program implementation.

- Provide extensive training when introducing a new program to ensure teachers and instructional support specialists implement the program correctly and effectively in the classroom.

- Evaluate the accessibility and usefulness of resources for teachers and students when selecting programs.

K-12 EDUCATION

"

"I had the five-day training [on Orton-Gillingham] about two or three years ago, and it was very intense. It was really beneficial in getting me into the classroom. I felt well-prepared to teach."

—Teacher (P7)

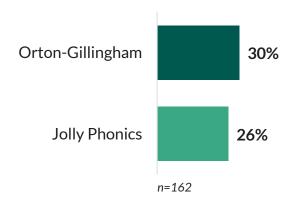# EXPRESS FRUSTRATIONS WITH STUDENT, TEACHER RESOURCES

Teachers and instructional support specialists need to supplement Jolly Phonics and Orton-Gillingham with materials from other programs like Heggerty and Flyleaf. Such materials primarily address gaps in the two programs' content (e.g., insufficient emphasis on phonetic awareness, comprehension, and decodable text). However, teachers and instructional support specialists also consider some of the two programs' materials outdated (i.e., not fully aligned with current research and practice) and only partially differentiated (e.g., lacking materials for supporting advanced students).

"I've always said to one of my principals, [and] I talk a lot about this, I say, **"Orton-Gillingham is years and years and years old. Yet it [hasn't] changed**."

—*Teacher (P9)*

Students are able to access [Jolly Phonics/Orton-Gillingham] materials outside the classroom.

% Agree + % Strongly Agree

Orton-Gillingham	**30%**
Jolly Phonics	**26%**

n=162

INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES & SUPPORTS

INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES & SUPPORTS

- **Teachers and instructional support specialists lack the time needed to manage increasingly heavy workloads.** For more than half of survey respondents (57%), these overwhelming workloads hinder literacy instruction in their school. Insufficient time for planning (47%) or collaborating with colleagues (31%) also poses a challenge. According to focus group participants and interviewees, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the stress many overworked educators already felt, further reducing morale and motivation.

- **In addition to manipulatives and technology, teachers and instructional support specialists need a comprehensive set of classroom instructional materials.** Survey respondents cite these items as priorities for making literacy instruction more effective. Similar feedback emerged in the focus groups and interviews. Manipulatives cited during those sessions, for example, include sand and Play-Doh.

   However, participants place particular emphasis on the importance of providing program-aligned lesson plans, activities, assignments, assessments, and interventions. To date, teachers have developed or obtained these items—which neither program supplied—themselves. These efforts require a significant time investment and contribute to inconsistencies in program delivery. Participants hope UCPS will provide materials that meet students' diverse needs and distribute them equitably across schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Build additional time and flexibility into educators' schedules for planning, collaboration, and professional learning.**

- **Examine workloads to identify responsibilities to potentially eliminate, reduce, or reallocate.**

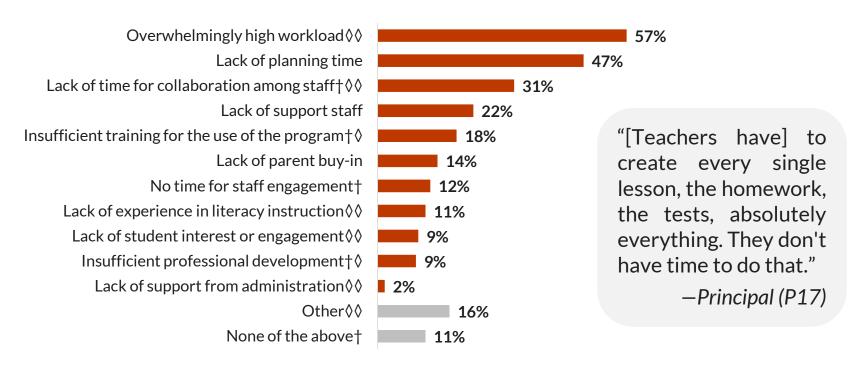- **Investigate the feasibility and desirability of developing classroom instructional materials internally or purchasing from a publisher/vendor.**

K-12 EDUCATION

GIVEN INSUFFICIENT TIME TO MANAGE HEAVY WORKLOAD

Which of the following do you consider to be barriers to literacy instruction at your school?‡

n=183

Barrier	Percentage
Overwhelmingly high workload◊◊	57%
Lack of planning time	47%
Lack of time for collaboration among staff†◊◊	31%
Lack of support staff	22%
Insufficient training for the use of the program†◊	18%
Lack of parent buy-in	14%
No time for staff engagement†	12%
Lack of experience in literacy instruction◊◊	11%
Lack of student interest or engagement◊◊	9%
Insufficient professional development†◊	9%
Lack of support from administration◊◊	2%
Other◊◊	16%
None of the above†	11%

> "[Teachers have] to create every single lesson, the homework, the tests, absolutely everything. They don't have time to do that."
>
> —*Principal (P17)*

‡ *Percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one barrier.*
† *Text is truncated for clarity and brevity.*
◊*This answer choice was only seen by those find the [Jolly Phonics/Orton-Gillingham] program "not at all user-friendly" to implement in the classroom.*
◊◊ *This answer choice was only seen by instructional staff.*

NEED MANIPULATIVES & OTHER PHYSICAL RESOURCES

> "[Teachers] should not have to spend the amount of time they do looking for something to teach. It should be at their fingertips."
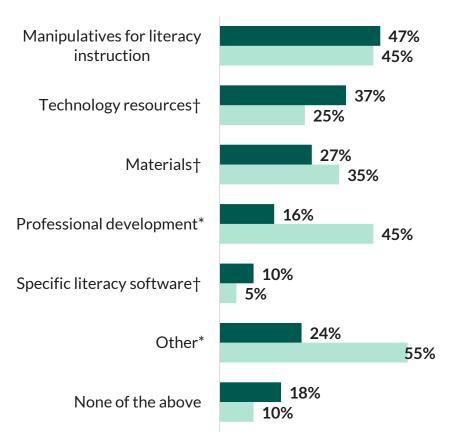>
> —*Principal (P16)*

> "Teachers should not have to go hunt for stuff on their own. It should be provided by the county."
>
> —*Principal (P12)*

Which of the following additional supports or resources do [you/staff] need to provide effective literacy instruction?

Please select all that apply.

■ Teachers (n=154)　■ School Administrators (n=20)

Category	Teachers	School Administrators
Manipulatives for literacy instruction	47%	45%
Technology resources†	37%	25%
Materials†	27%	35%
Professional development*	16%	45%
Specific literacy software†	10%	5%
Other*	24%	55%
None of the above	18%	10%

‡ *Percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one support.*
† *Text is truncated for clarity and brevity.*
* *Denotes a statistically-significant difference (95% confidence level) between groups.*

"We need a framework for teachers [with] baseline expectations, research-based resources, assessment tools, and interventions that [support] students"

—Vice Principal (P14)

Thank you.

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