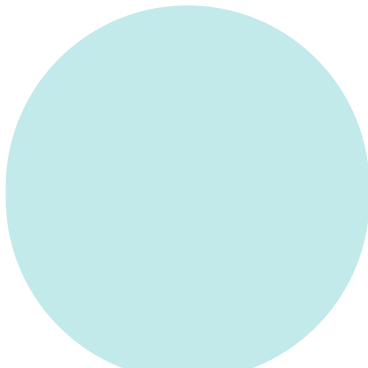
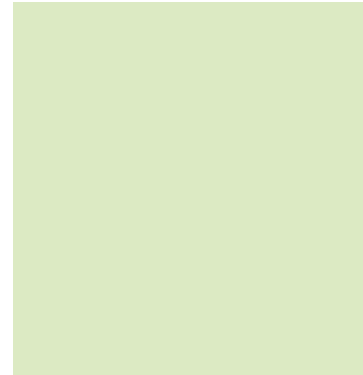
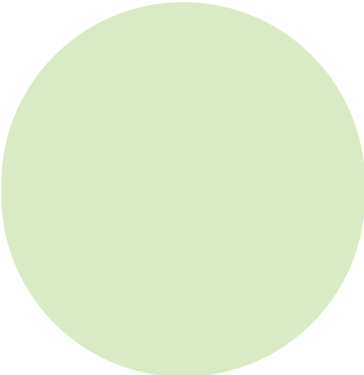
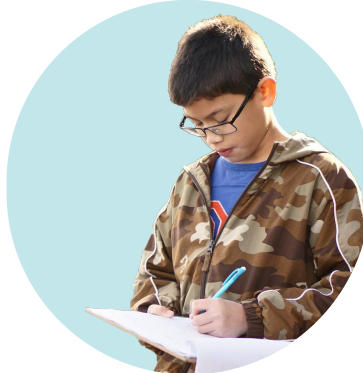
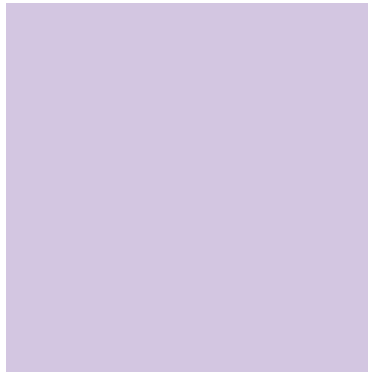


2021/22

# RESPONDING TO READERS: A BRIEF REPORT



# A MESSAGE FROM SURREY SCHOOLS

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Surrey Schools is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Katzie, Kwan-tlen, Semiahmoo and other Coast Salish Peoples. It is B.C.'s largest school district where close to 12,000 employees serve almost 75,000 children in our diverse multicultural city. We have over 130 educational sites from early learning to adult education.

The District is committed to continuous improvement and success of all students through implementation of evidence-informed practices that enhance student learning, inclusivity and equity of outcomes. We welcome and honour diversity while supporting students' holistic growth—mind, body and heart—a commitment captured in our welcome video, *Éy swayel / Bienvenue / Welcome to Surrey Schools*.



Click to watch our welcome video, [Éy swayel / Bienvenue / Welcome to Surrey Schools](#).

**TITLE:** Responding to Readers: A Brief Report, 2021/22

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Celine Feazel, Courtney Jones, and Ginny Tambre (Literacy Helping Teachers) are tremendous leaders in this work. They are responsible for developing and facilitating Responding to Readers. This work would also be impossible without the commitment of the classroom teachers who took part in the initiative and completed reflections and assessments of their focal students to support and improve their students' reading competencies.

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# RESPONDING TO READERS

“There’s my brain with wrinkles. You know, a lot of brains have wrinkles. It gets wrinkles so it can hold a lot of things. Some brains are smooth so they can hold less. I have a *really* wrinkly brain so I’m going to add more wrinkles. In the really big wrinkles, there are sometimes big words. Some wrinkles can go through other wrinkles and hold onto ideas. There can be multiple things in my brain.”

- Surrey Elementary Student

These are words from an elementary student when asked by their teacher about their interest in reading and vocabulary. However, many children – despite all having a “brain with wrinkles” – read at different levels, which influences their overall learning and success in school.

In addition, the events of the past few years have had significant impacts on the children in our learning communities. Despite these ongoing challenges, however, teachers foster learning environments where children can continue to thrive as learners. As understandings of readers, reading instruction, and assessment evolves, our district considered how best to assess our readers’ progress and support their next steps – wrinkles and all.

The Responding to Readers (RtR) initiative provided an opportunity for cohorts of teachers to look closely at their readers and connect with district helping teachers

towards being able to better support learners in diverse contexts. The group came together to understand their student’s experiences with reading, to explore reading assessment practices that could take place on a regular basis in the classroom, and to then consider responsive instruction based on the skills and contexts of their readers. Teachers from around the district had diverse reasons for taking part - to be re-inspired, to make connections, and to improve their practice.

“Covid sucked the life and energy out of me. Love the kids, love reading, love the work...but I am so tired and feel deafeated and deflated. I joined [RtR] just to refresh and to be inspired again...[as] another reminder to connect in a meaningful way with my readers.”

- Surrey Elementary Teacher

## Beginnings and Intentions

The initial thinking for RtR was generated when 100 primary teachers engaged in a book club about *Shifting the Balance* (Burkins and Yates, 2021). From the ideas discussed in that meeting, a smaller community of teachers began participating in the RtR initiative, supported by the district's literacy helping teachers. Through collaboration and inquiring with curiosity, this group wanted to better understand the impact of learning

environments over the last few years, and work together to make instructional decisions around how to respond to the needs of our students. Through collaboration and inquiring with curiosity, this group wanted to better understand the impact of learning environments over the last few years, and work together to make instructional decisions around how to respond to the needs of our students. The intentions for RtR were to *investigate, examine, engage, and interpret*.

### INVESTIGATE

the impact of pandemic years on reading development and student experience

### EXAMINE

processes and tools for uncovering student proficiency in reading

### ENGAGE

in collaborative professional learning to better understand how children learn to read

### INTERPRET

evidence in order to focus instruction and move student learning forward

## Process and Activities

Starting March 2022, 7 primary and 15 intermediate teachers worked closely with five readers within their classroom they selected to give focus. By participating they also committed to collaborate with colleagues and literacy helping teachers, and to look for ways to examine and enhance their literacy instruction. As one teacher put it, they came to learn the following about their readers:

“To get my reluctant readers to read. Also, to get students to go beyond the text and ask the deep-thinking questions. I want to learn how to respond better to my students about reading. I want them to think. To be inquisitive and have inquiry-based ideas. I also want them to enjoy reading.”

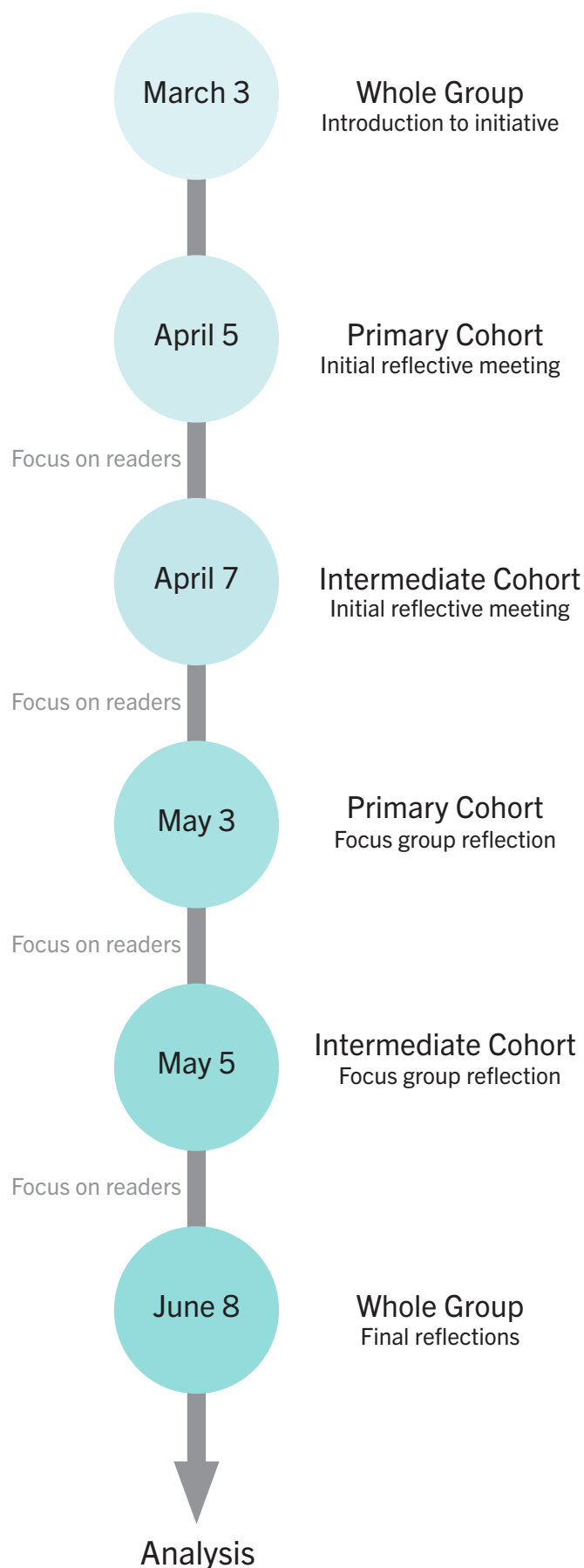
Teachers' interests and inquiries ranged from reading fluency and comprehension, supporting students through hurdles like Covid interruptions in learning, and working with a range of formative assessments to better support instruction. The overarching question guiding the RtR initiative asked, How are our readers doing? The natural follow-up question was, How do we know this?

Two primary aspects were foundational to the RtR initiative emerged from this survey. The first aspect facilitated teachers to deeply focus on their readers in their classroom. This aspect included furthering their existing relationships with students, spending time on reflection, and telling the story of their student's reading journey – in focused and manageable ways. Teachers gathered evidence through regular reading meetings and one-on-one interactions with their selected students in their classroom. In doing so, teachers deepened understandings of their readers by utilizing an approach where observations and assessments, conversations and products create a more fully developed picture of their readers.

Reflection by teachers has been shown to improve teaching practice and success for students, and this was the second aspect was embedded into the initiative. RtR created safe spaces for primary and intermediate teachers to deeply reflect on their practice by working closely with their readers and collaborating with other professionals. Learning from the information and stories from the one-on-one meetings with the focal readers, teachers came together twice with others from their specific cohorts for reflective meetings, facilitated by district helping teachers. In these meetings, some shared video clips, others brought pictures and stories of their learners to unpack their own thinking and wonders.



**Figure 1.** *RtR aspects, process, and timeline, 2021/22*



## Activities in RtR

- teachers selected and focused on a group of five readers
- teachers gathered existing evidence of each student's reading development
- teachers deepened their understanding of their readers through regular observations and reflection
- teachers shared observations, what they are learning, and what they are wondering as they collaborated with colleagues



To support planning and programming for the RtR Initiative, participating teachers filled out a survey with 22 close- and open-ended questions relating to their expectations of the initiative, defining proficiency levels of their five focal students, and their own practices and understandings of reading instruction and assessment. This survey also gathered details about teacher profiles, beliefs, and access to resources and supports.



Teachers completed four reflectionnaires over four months of the RtR initiative, which offered time and space for thoughtful considerations of their students' stories and contexts, as well as their instructional practices in response. Each month, teachers responded to two open-ended reflective questions related to their selected students. Some example questions to enhance reader profile and prompt deep thinking about the reader and practice included:

What did I notice?

Which of my hunches about this reader were confirmed?

What was I unable to confirm?

What new questions do I have?

What does this reader need me to learn next?

Am I equipped to support this reader?

Do I need to seek out professional learning resources or support?

These documents and collaborative conversations provided important opportunities for teachers to create reading profiles of their selected students, consider their initial questions about the readers, reflect on their students' strengths and stretches, consider supports and activities, and plan for instruction. Teachers had access to release time through all RtR processes and activities.

## Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation methodology of the RtR initiative integrated ideas borrowed from Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE)<sup>1</sup> which begins with the premise that applied research should be judged by their utility and actual use. Careful consideration went into the development of data collection tools, when they were to be administered, and how data would be analyzed. The reflectionnaires were designed with the end-users in mind, which in this case were classroom teachers taking part in the RtR initiative and the Literacy Helping Teachers facilitating RtR sessions.

A key element in the evaluation research process was the active participation of the district's Literacy Helping Teachers who ensured appropriate tools and systems were in place, that reflection time and space was offered,

the needs of the evaluation project were identified and addressed, and key considerations for future action were established to support a pathway for future RtR initiative activities.

Qualitative data from the open-ended survey and reflectionnaire responses were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques<sup>2</sup>. This began with a line-by-line analysis of responses to open-ended questions, identifying and coding salient features in the data. These codes were then collated into higher-level themes, refined, and compared between and across cohorts.

Summary of Results

The following sections present outcomes from the RtR initiative and relate to the two primary aspects of RtR - deep engagement with focal students; and individual and shared reflection with other professionals – leading to instructional changes and positive outcome for learners. Emerging from the analysis of teacher reflections were four themes that were key to the initiative. These themes include: (1)Understanding Students, (2) Offering Supports, (3) Teachers Paying Attention, and (4) Students Applying Learning (see Table 3).

Table 3. Emerging themes from RtR teacher reflections, 2021/22

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS	OFFERING SUPPORTS	TEACHERS PAYING ATTENTION	STUDENTS APPLYING LEARNING
<i>through one-on-one time</i>	<i>based on context</i>	<i>through one-on-one time</i>	<i>with strategies and self-awareness</i>
Teachers emphasized one-on-one time as important moments to identify and understand student needs, especially around decoding, fluency, and reading comprehension	Based on one-on-one context, teachers offered specific supports for improving reading skills, often strategic lessons and resources	Teachers benefitted from explicit attention to reading instruction practices, including new learnings and curiosities to support learners	As reading skills progressed, students applied new learning, built self-awareness and confidence



## 1. UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS through one-on-one time

Among both primary and intermediate cohorts of teachers there was consensus that one-on-one time was crucial to identify what student needs for reading supports. This identification began with understanding a student's strengths and stretches, and what motivates students who were reluctant readers and those who enjoyed reading.

### Identifying and understanding aspects of students' decoding and fluency skills

The one-on-one conferencing was crucial to supporting students who might be having difficulty with aspects of reading. While decoding, fluency, and read comprehension were most common issues, teachers were able to notice whether students needed help with pronouncing words or were guessing words when reading, and when students were "benefitting from classroom or individual instruction". Teachers were able to support students one-on-one by using assessment tools like Elkonin boxes, choosing reading levels, learning about home language and literacies contexts, and recognizing individual reading preferences.

For instance, a few children assessed as having poor comprehension were reading books below their level. However, upon questioning teachers realized that these students did so because they enjoyed graphic novels and books that were funny. As one student acknowledged:

"I like Geronimo books because they are funny, I know they are below my grade. I also like Wimpy Kid Diary. I like funny books."

### Identifying and understanding other aspects of students' reading motivation

One-on-one time also supported students with confidence issues related to reading and learning since many found it more comfortable to work with a teacher without all their classmates present. As one teacher said, "I am learning that this student is more confident to ask questions and confirmations when working one on one than to raise hand in a group setting."

Most teachers agreed that "Individual conferences are what the kids look forward to the most. Having this 1:1 time and sharing what's going well and making space to discuss stretches is huge for growing readers!" Both reluctant and eager readers "thrived with one-on-one support and positive reinforcements."

## 2. OFFERING SUPPORTS based on context

As a result of the one-on-one time, teachers deeply learned about their focus readers and were able to offer supports, resources, and reading strategies to grow their readers' practices and encourage new learning.

### Offering strategic lessons and practices as supports

For primary teachers, these supports often included explicit modeling of decoding strategies, including "sound it out, split syllables, segmenting and blending, [and] chunking." One teacher described their interest in "structured and explicit phonics instruction":

"Early oral phonemic awareness (in K) is foundational for student success as well. In isolation, readers know their letter sounds very well. Students can also sit through the phonics lessons and learn the concepts in isolation... Putting it together or using their reading strategies on their own is the tough part."

Supporting students also included offering exercises like Haggerty routines and using Elkonin boxes, processes that help students slow down and think, "look, listen and form those sound, and then translate sounds attached to letters."

Sometimes these strategies took the form of teachers reminding and prompting students to slow down when reading to help with comprehension; at other times it was prompting students to use reading strategies, like picture clues, initial sounds, tool sounds, or chunking.

### Offering strategic resources as supports

For intermediate teachers, offering supports took the form of explicit instruction – for the whole class and during one-on-ones – around comprehension, vocabulary, making connections from the text. Teachers shared resources and strategies for students to "learn how to recognize when they have made a mistake and learn how to self-correct." Many intermediate students needed to be taught how to determine the meaning of words they do not know, for example, using context clues or online dictionaries.

Intermediate teachers wanted to make "reading fun with rich learning." However, a few mentioned the socially constructed yet gendered aspect of reading when learners reach certain grades, leading some students to prefer an identity as a reluctant reader.

"I would like to engage this student with new reading strategies and a new outlook on their reading that will trickle down and influence their friends in positive ways. I have many reluctant readers who identify as "not a reading guy", and this reader is a part of that friendship."



### 3. TEACHERS PAYING ATTENTION towards their own pedagogical learning

An outcome from the RtR was that teachers benefitted from the process of paying explicit attention to aspects of their reading instruction practices. By having the time to look closely and deeply at their focus readers, teachers supported their own pedagogical growth in being able to support all learners in their classroom.

#### Paying explicit attention to reading instruction practices

Teachers expressed that the process of participating in RtR helped them to learn about new evidence-based ideas and techniques to support reading, including Science of Reading principles, varied forms of assessments, and fresh reading strategies to support diverse readers in their classrooms. A few wanted to build more hands-on experiences into their lessons while others expressed curiosity about theoretical ideas related to reading development, including this teacher who wondered about a student:

“His reading mirrors what’s happening in his language development. I want to know more about the connection between the two. Is language growth opening up reading growth? Is reading growth opening up language growth?”

#### Paying explicit attention to curiosities and contexts

Many teachers took this opportunity to wonder about the impact of the home lives of their students, including challenges and constraints at home, literacy and fluency in home languages, and the roles and strategies of parents in literacy learning. For example, one teacher said:

“My student says that he doesn’t like to read and has no interest in reading whatsoever. We investigated why he does not see himself as a reader. He mentioned that at home he ‘Has to read, which he hates’ and if he doesn’t read, he does not get screen time.”

Many teachers emphasized the contexts of their learners and their needs, and paid attention to how these situations impacted their learning.

“Came to Canada in Grade 2. Punjabi is the primary language spoken at home. Went to school in India, didn’t learn English at school, everything was taught in Hindi. Unable to read or write in Punjabi, but parents can. Has previous extended vacations, as well as gaps in learning from COVID impacted their ability to read?”

#### Paying explicit attention to reflection

For most teachers, RtR provided an opportunity to reflect on their own learning. As one intermediate teacher said, their biggest learning was “This learner needs me to become a better teacher.”

Teachers also benefitted from collaborative reflection with other teachers and district staff to consider issues from a range of professional perspectives to better support their readers.

“Time to collaborate with like-minded teachers is super important to me. When it happens, it is so energizing and exciting. These times lead to so many more greater ideas.”

### 4. STUDENTS APPLYING LEARNING with strategies and self-awareness

Teachers recognized that their participating in the RtR initiative and making changes to their practice led to some student improvements in reading.

#### Students applying reading strategies

Providing extra time, targeted questions and instruction supported students’ development. A few primary teachers reported that time to practice helped students in transferring reading strategies, and “applying what we have been working on in class.” Targeted questions supported learners in focusing on applying specific skills that they had discussed. As one student said: “I recognize some of these sight words! This was easy!”

Another improvement was in intermediate students supporting themselves using multimodal ways - through listening, viewing, and experiencing in multiple ways and forms - before reading. For one struggling reader, listening to a story supported visualizing it.

“He said enjoys listening to “Hatchet” as an audiobook because he likes when people read to him, and he can “see the story in his mind.”

#### Students’ increasing reading confidence and self-awareness

Teachers also reported readers’ improved confidence even if some of their progress has been slow. As they moved across reading levels and practiced skills and strategies, students’ motivation for and interest in reading improved.

“The more she reads in class the more confident she becomes. During her free time, she will now read instead of doing a centers activity. She tries harder at segmenting and blending. She regulates herself and makes positive self-statements like, ‘I am trying, doing my best, I can sound it out’.”

Importantly, many students gained self-awareness of themselves as readers. Some were able to explore for themselves why they might have issues with reading:

“I don’t read books because something comes up (busy with friends or helping my mom). ...Reading is OK, I’m not saying I can read well, but I’m OK. When I read out loud, I get somethings wrong. I like to read in my brain (when I get it wrong in my brain, I can think about it). When I read out loud I can’t do this.”

Other students explored what brought them some success:

“When I am reading, I want to get better at thinking while reading and slowing down. Sometimes I keep reading and then realize I don’t know what happened. When this happens, I go back especially if I am curious and keep in mind, this is what is happening now.”

“The skill you need to be a good reader is to have the attention span to read. You need to visualize (if you don’t visualize in your head, you can’t get a picture of what is happening). You need to connect to the main character so you can feel what is happening to them because it has happened to you.”



## Wonderings Being Explored

Many teachers commented that they found success when students were engaged, and when meaningful learning and conversations take place. Others were interested in improving their students’ reading practice “regardless of whether they are considered low, middle, or high” and were struggling with the range of reading levels in their class. As they wrapped up the RtR initiative, some wonders teachers were exploring included:

How do we approach the reading of indigenous language in picture books respectfully?

Literacy and a trauma informed lens – recognizing the “tipping point” for some of our learners – just like we do in ourselves.

How does this student’s ELL level impact their ability as a reader?

How do gender and culture impact this students’ abilities as a reader?



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