



# Early Reading Instruction

Results of a National Survey



EdWeek<sup>™</sup>  
**Research Center**

Support for this study provided by  
the Education Writers Association

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## About the Education Writers Association

The mission of the Education Writers Association is to strengthen the community of education writers and improve the quality of education coverage to better inform the public.

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## Executive Summary

For many years, a subset of educators, researchers, and advocates have claimed that early readers need more explicit, systematic phonics-related instruction than they currently receive in most American schools. They have also contended that teacher education programs are not doing a good job of preparing their graduates to provide this type of instruction.

However, such claims have often been based on anecdotal reports rather than on more methodical efforts to explore what’s actually being taught in elementary schools and teacher education programs. In the fall of 2019, the EdWeek Research Center aimed to conduct such an exploration by deploying two surveys on perceptions and practices related to early reading instruction. One survey was taken by 674 K-2 and elementary special education teachers who indicated that they had taught children how to read. The other was taken by 533 postsecondary instructors who indicated that they had taught courses on how to teach students to read. The survey was conducted with financial support from the Education Writers Association, a non-profit, non-partisan organization that aims to improve the skills and knowledge of education journalists.

Most elementary special education and K-2 teachers (72 percent) say their schools use balanced literacy. The surveys also found that balanced literacy is the reading instruction philosophy embraced by most survey respondents, although significant generational gaps exist: The less experience they have in higher education, the more likely postsecondary instructors are to favor explicit, systematic phonics with language comprehension as a separate focus. And the more experience they have in the classroom, the more likely elementary teachers are to support balanced literacy.

There is no single definition of balanced literacy. Although it does typically incorporate phonics, it has been criticized for paying insufficient attention to explicit, systematic instruction of this topic. However, regardless of their reading instruction philosophies, most survey respondents say they place a lot of emphasis on phonics. When teaching children to read, K-2 and elementary special education teachers report that they spend 39 percent of their literacy instructional time on phonics, for a median of 31 minutes a day. And the vast majority of postsecondary instructors (86 percent) say they model phonics instruction during courses that cover reading.

That said, the survey does raise concerns for those who contend that students need more explicit phonics instruction. For example, the Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention is the program most frequently used in elementary schools. Students at the lowest levels of this program read books with predictable sentence structures and pictures that illustrate words, rather than so-called “decodable” books that encourage students to sound out words. Most survey respondents also teach the three-cueing system. Three-cueing is an approach that tells students to use pictures and context to identify unfamiliar words. Critics contend that this encourages guessing rather than reading and that it was developed based on the inefficient habits of struggling readers: Children should instead sound out new words, a trait associated with proficient readers.

More than half of survey respondents say it is possible for students to understand written texts with unfamiliar words even if they do not have a good grasp of phonics. That’s in conflict with a framework known as the Simple View of Reading, which says that reading comprehension requires both good decoding and good language skills. And most also said that skilled readers

rely on context and visuals, and not just letters, to know what a word says. Research suggests that proficient readers attend to all the letters to identify a word they don't yet know how to read.

The survey did find, however, that most survey respondents say a child's first response to an unfamiliar word should be to sound it out.

The vast majority of survey respondents displayed familiarity with basic tenets of phonics instruction, correctly defining an open syllable (a syllable that ends with a vowel) and naming the number of phonemes in the word "shape" (three). Most also correctly identified all five essential early reading components defined by the 2000 National Reading Panel report (comprehension, fluency, phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary). However, postsecondary instructors were considerably more likely than elementary teachers to get all five components correct (78 percent versus 55 percent).

Overall, the survey results neither suggest that explicit, systematic phonics instruction is absent from U.S. schools nor that it is universally embraced. Instead, they indicate that most educators are using a mix of instructional techniques, some of which are in conflict with each other. In addition, a survey necessarily relies on self-reports from the respondents. Especially when it comes to nebulously defined concepts like "balanced literacy," it may be necessary to conduct observational studies to examine what is really going on in America's elementary classrooms and early literacy instruction courses.

## Introduction and Methodology

With roots dating back to the 1800s, the so-called “reading wars” attracted immense attention during the 1980s and 90s. Phonics (correlating sounds with letters or groups of letters) became associated with politically conservative ideologies. Left-leaning ideologies were associated with “whole language,” literacy instruction that emphasizes learning whole words and phrases in meaningful contexts.

Soon after the turn of the century, these debates simmered down, although they did continue to attract public attention from time to time. Then in the fall of 2018, the release of an American Public Media documentary, *Hard Words*, helped thrust the debate back into the public eye. *Hard Words* found that phonics is receiving too little attention or is ignored altogether in some schools and teacher education programs. The piece reignited interest in early literacy instruction, inspiring numerous commentaries and additional reporting from other media outlets.

One challenge, however, was that, although prior reporting highlighted clear examples of schools and states that did or did not emphasize phonics, the national picture remained murky.

It was not entirely clear how early reading teachers as a group taught phonics, or what they knew about it. Nor was it evident what instructors in teacher preparation programs believed or taught about that topic.

In fall of 2019, the EdWeek Research Center set out to gain a clearer sense of nationwide teacher and teacher education perceptions and practices by sending out two surveys about topics related to early reading instruction, especially as it related to phonics.

One survey was sent to a commercially available list containing all or almost all the

higher education professionals in the country, according to the company that compiled it. The list included email addresses for higher education professionals at four-year colleges or universities who had titles that EdWeek editorial staff believed indicated that they might teach early reading instruction to teachers or prospective teachers. Respondents were excluded if their responses to the first few survey questions indicated that they were not currently teaching in higher education or if they indicated that they had never taught any courses covering early reading instruction (for students in grades K-2) or remedial reading. The survey attracted a total of 533 qualified respondents.

The other survey was sent to a randomly selected sample of all the K-2 teachers in this country. It was also sent to a random sample of all the K-12 teachers in the country.

The samples were provided via a commercially available list that contains every or almost every K-12 teacher in the country, according to the company. Respondents were excluded from the survey if their responses indicated they had not taught kindergarten, 1st grade, 2nd grade, or elementary special education in the past 10 years. The survey was restricted to K-2 and elementary special education because its focus was early reading and these teachers are most likely to teach children how to read.

Respondents to the elementary survey were also excluded if they indicated they had never taught students to read. The survey attracted 674 qualified respondents.

Throughout the survey, higher education instructors were asked about their approaches to teaching students how to teach early reading. Elementary special education and K-2 teachers were asked about approaches they use to teach children how to read. Both groups were also asked to answer some basic questions about phonics and phonemic awareness.

The results were not weighted or altered in any way. This report describes the survey results.

# Instructional Approaches

## Reading Instruction Philosophies

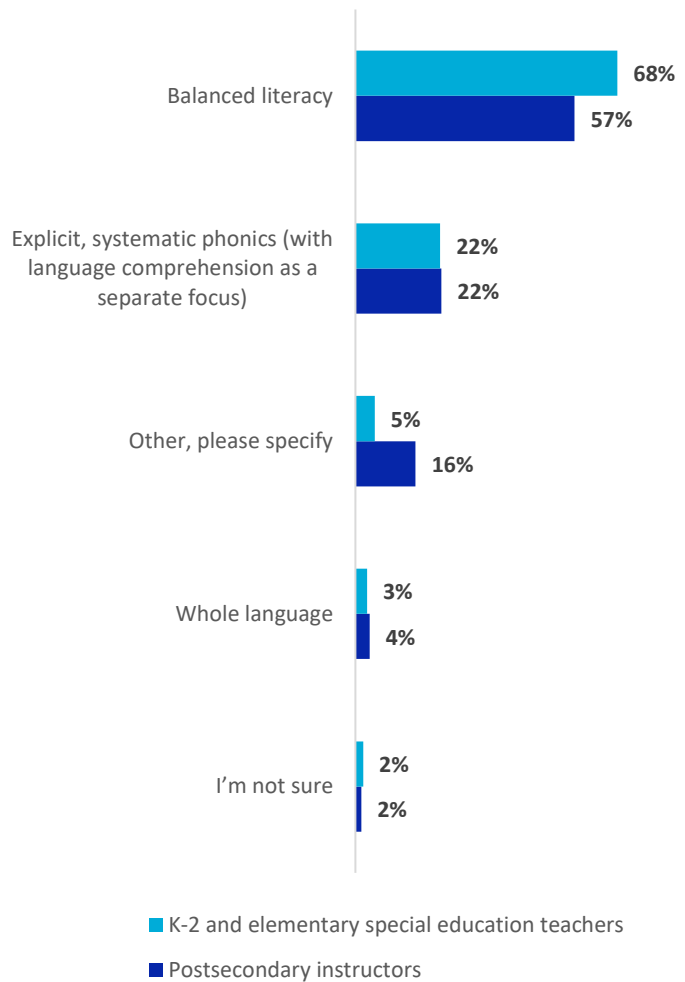
When it comes to their philosophies of teaching early reading, K-2 and special education teachers and higher education instructors are on the same page. The majority of both groups embrace balanced literacy. Although there is no one official definition of this approach, common components include shared reading (teacher reads aloud, students ask questions); guided reading (students gather in small, teacher-led groups to read texts meant to match their levels of ability); and independent reading (students read on their own). Although phonics can be and often is part of the approach, critics say it gives short shrift to this crucial aspect of early reading.

Reading philosophies differ sharply by generation. For instance, the more experience they have in K-12, the more likely K-2 and elementary special education teachers are to support balanced literacy. Less than half (46 percent) of those with 10 years of experience embrace this philosophy as compared to 71 percent of respondents with more than 20 years in K-12.

Postsecondary instructors with more years of experience in higher education are less likely to embrace explicit, systematic phonics instruction with language comprehension as a separate focus: Thirty-two percent of instructors with less than six years of experience in higher education embrace this approach. By contrast, that share falls to eight percent for those with twenty or more years of experience.

Nearly half of postsecondary instructors who've never taught in K-12 embrace phonics plus comprehension as compared to 27 percent who spent five years or less in elementary or secondary schools and just 15 percent who worked in K-12 for more than 20 years.

### What is your philosophy of teaching early reading?



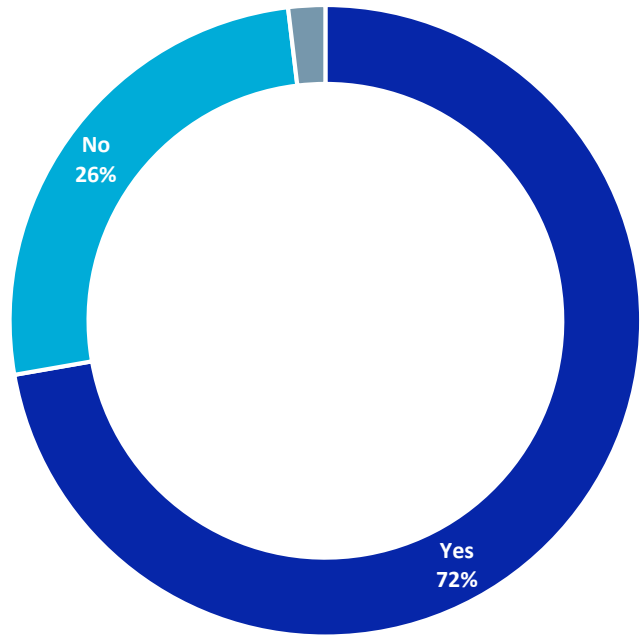
## Use of Balanced Literacy

Nearly three quarters of elementary teachers surveyed say their schools use balanced literacy.

Teachers in smaller districts with enrollments under 2,500 are least likely to say their schools use balanced literacy (68 percent). By contrast, the approach is used in the schools of 80 percent of teachers in districts with enrollments of 2,500 to 9,999 and 74 percent of those in districts of 10,000 or more students.

### Does your school use balanced literacy?

N/A: I no longer teach at the elementary level, 2%





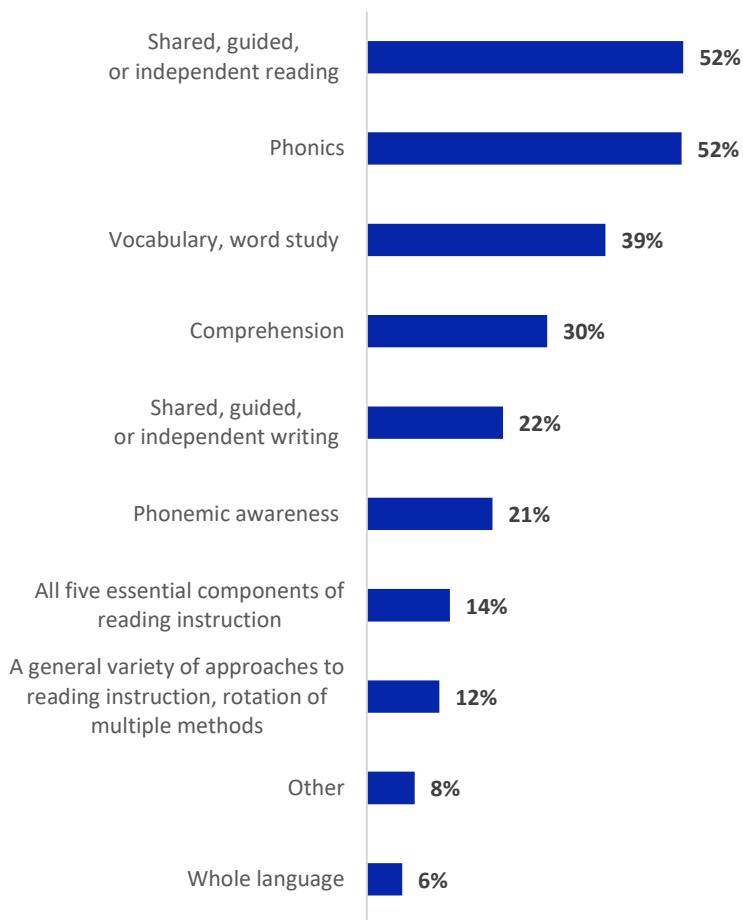
## Defining Balanced Literacy

Because there's no one definition of balanced literacy, the survey asked K-2 and elementary special education teachers how they would define the term.

Although sometimes criticized as failing to incorporate phonics, balanced literacy was typically perceived to include this aspect of reading instruction. Just over half the respondents (52 percent) mentioned the word "phonics." Twenty-one percent included "phonemic awareness" in their definitions. And 14 percent said that balanced literacy included all five essential components of reading instruction, i.e., comprehension, fluency, phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary. That said, it's still not clear from a written definition whether or not teachers are implementing the approach in such a way that it incorporates sufficient attention to phonics and/or phonemic awareness.

The postsecondary survey did not ask respondents how they would define balanced literacy.

### How would you define balanced literacy?



## Sounding Out Unfamiliar Words

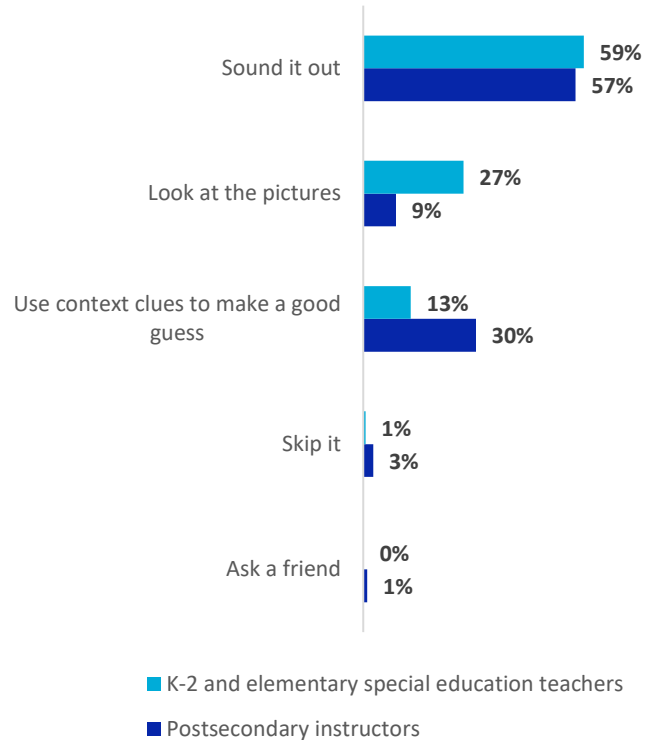
Learning to sound out words is a critical component of early reading. Most K-2 and special education teachers and postsecondary instructors say that's exactly what children should do first when they come across an unknown word — sound it out.

However, a considerable minority advocate other approaches, including looking at pictures or using context clues to guess. A drawback to these techniques is that students may appear to be reading when they are just guessing.

Views of sounding out words differ significantly by years of experience. While 86 percent of K-2 and special education teachers with 10 years or less of experience advise students to sound out words, that share drops to 57 percent for those with more than 20 years in the classroom. Similarly, sounding out words first is advised by 69 percent of instructors with five years or less experience in higher ed but just 38 percent of those with more than 20 years. And the approach is advised by 82 percent of postsecondary instructors who've never taught in K-12, 58 percent with five years teaching or less, and 43 percent who spent more than 20 years in elementary or secondary education. Among elementary teachers — although not in higher ed — views on sounding out words also differ by region. Seventy percent of Southern teachers and 60 percent of their Western peers advise students to initially approach an unfamiliar word by sounding it out. By contrast, less than half of Northeasterners (49 percent) and just over half of Midwesterners (51 percent) say children should sound out the word.

For this survey question, elementary teachers were asked: If a student who is learning to read comes to a word that he/she doesn't know, what do you tell him/her to do first? Postsecondary instructors were asked: If a student who is learning to read comes to a word that he/she doesn't know, what should the teacher tell him/her to do first?

### If a student who is learning to read comes to a word that he/she doesn't know, what do you [what should the teacher] tell him/her to do first?



## The Three-Cueing System

An approach inspired partly by the work of Ken and Yetta Goodman of the University of Arizona, the three-cueing system encourages students to try to identify unfamiliar words using background knowledge/context, structure/syntax, and/or visuals (e.g., uppercase versus lowercase). Cognitive scientists and neuroscientists have found that guessing is less efficient than sounding words out.

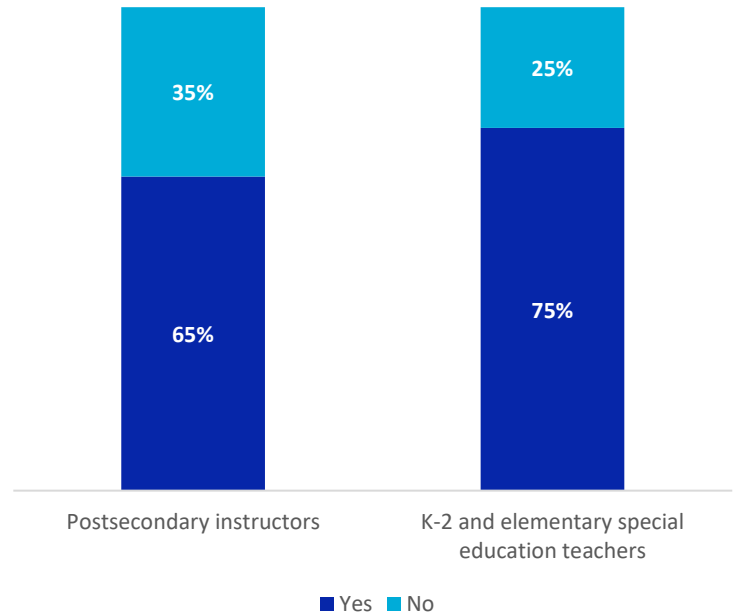
The majority of both elementary and postsecondary instructors say they teach the three-cueing system.

However, generational differences exist. Three-cueing is taught by 46 percent of K-2 and special education teachers with 10 years or less experience but 79 percent of those with more than 20 years in the field. Similarly, three-cueing is taught by 55 percent of postsecondary instructors with fewer than six years in higher education but 78 percent of those with more than 20 years. It's taught by just 19 percent of postsecondary instructors who've never worked in K-12, 59 percent who spent five years or less in elementary or secondary schools, and 72 percent of those with more than 20 years in that field.

For this survey question, elementary teachers were asked: *When you're teaching students to read, do you teach the three-cueing system (i.e., meaning/structure/visual or semantic/syntactic/graphophonic)?*

Postsecondary instructors were asked: *Do you teach the three-cueing system (i.e., meaning/structure/visual or semantic/syntactic/graphophonic)?*

**[When you're teaching students to read] do you teach the three-cueing system (i.e., meaning/structure/visual or semantic/syntactic/graphophonic)?**



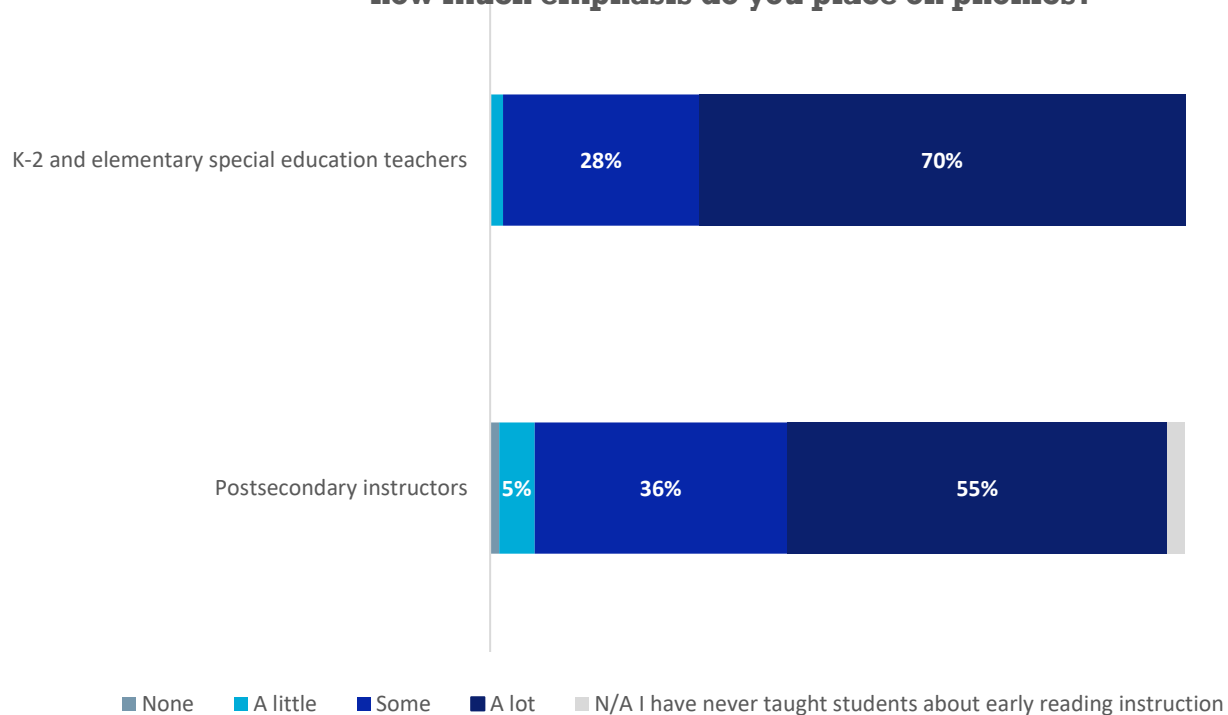
## Level of Emphasis on Phonics

K-2 and special education teachers place considerably more emphasis on phonics than do their postsecondary peers. However, once again, generational differences exist. Phonics receives a lot of emphasis from 62 percent of higher ed instructors with five years or less in postsecondary education but just 42 percent of those with 20 years or more in the field. Generational differences are not statistically significant among K-2 and special education teachers.

Postsecondary instructors are also more likely to place a lot of emphasis on phonics if their highest degree is a master's (62 percent) than if it's a PhD or EdD (53 percent).

For this survey question, elementary teachers were asked: *When you're teaching students to read, how much emphasis do you place on phonics?* Postsecondary instructors were asked: *When you teach students about early reading instruction, how much emphasis do you place on phonics?*

**When you're teaching students to read  
[teaching students about early reading instruction],  
how much emphasis do you place on phonics?**



## Time Spent on Reading, Phonics

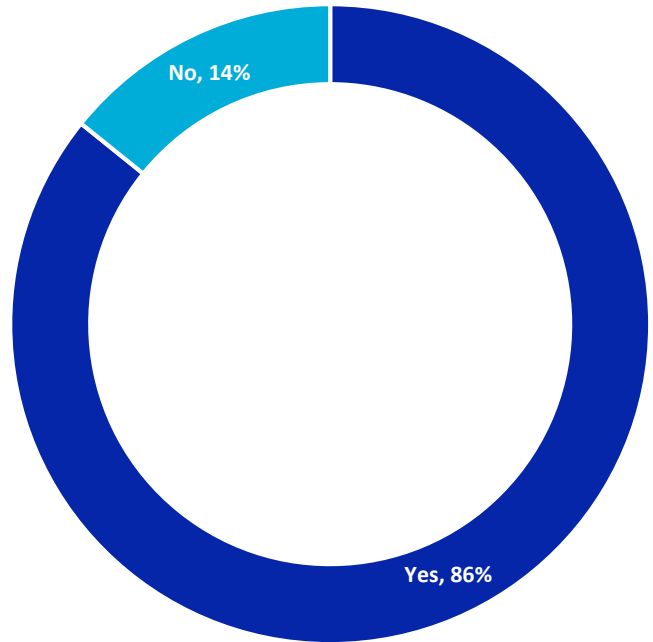
The typical (median) K-2 or elementary special education teacher spends 80 minutes per day on literacy instruction when teaching students to read. Nearly 40 percent of this time (31 minutes daily) is devoted to phonics.

<b>Elementary teachers: Time spent on early reading, phonics instruction</b>	
When you're teaching students to read, how many minutes per day do you typically spend on literacy instruction?	<b>80</b>
When you're teaching students to read, how many minutes per day do you typically spend on phonics instruction?	<b>31</b>
Percentage of reading instruction time spent on phonics	<b>39%</b>

## Modeling Phonics Instruction

The vast majority of postsecondary survey respondents say they model how to teach phonics when they teach courses that cover early reading. Just 14 percent say they do not.

### Do you model how to teach phonics in your courses that cover reading?



## Books for Beginning Readers

Elementary and postsecondary teachers are both most likely to say that, when working in small groups, beginning readers should use leveled readers. These texts feature high-frequency words, predictable sentence structures, and pictures that emphasize meaning. Such books can be used to support reading instruction that encourages students to use pictures as clues to guess at unfamiliar words. The more experienced the teacher, the more likely she is to use leveled readers for group work. Thirty-nine percent of elementary teachers with 10 or less years of experience use these books as compared to 61 percent of those with 20 years or more in the field. Similarly, the percentage of higher ed instructors who embrace leveled readers for groupwork varies from 42 percent for respondents with less than six years of experience; to 61 percent of instructors who've spent more than 20 years in the field.

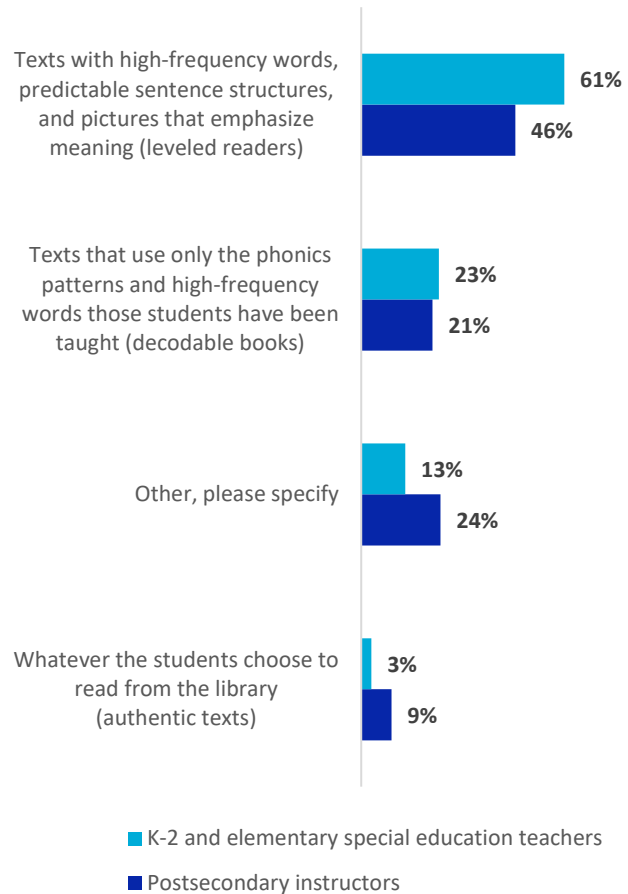
Decodable books use phonics patterns and high-frequency words (such as “the”) that students have already been taught. These books encourage students to sound out unfamiliar words. Evidence is mixed when it comes to the effectiveness of these books.

Compared to their peers in lower-poverty schools, elementary teachers in schools in which more than half the students are low-income are significantly more likely to use decodable books for groupwork (17 percent versus 29 percent).

For this survey question, elementary teachers were asked: *When beginning readers are in small groups in your classroom, what kind of texts do they read most often?*

Postsecondary instructors were asked: *When beginning readers are in small groups, what kind of texts should teachers have them read most often?*

### When beginning readers are in small groups, what kind of texts should teachers have them read most often/what kind of texts do they read most often?



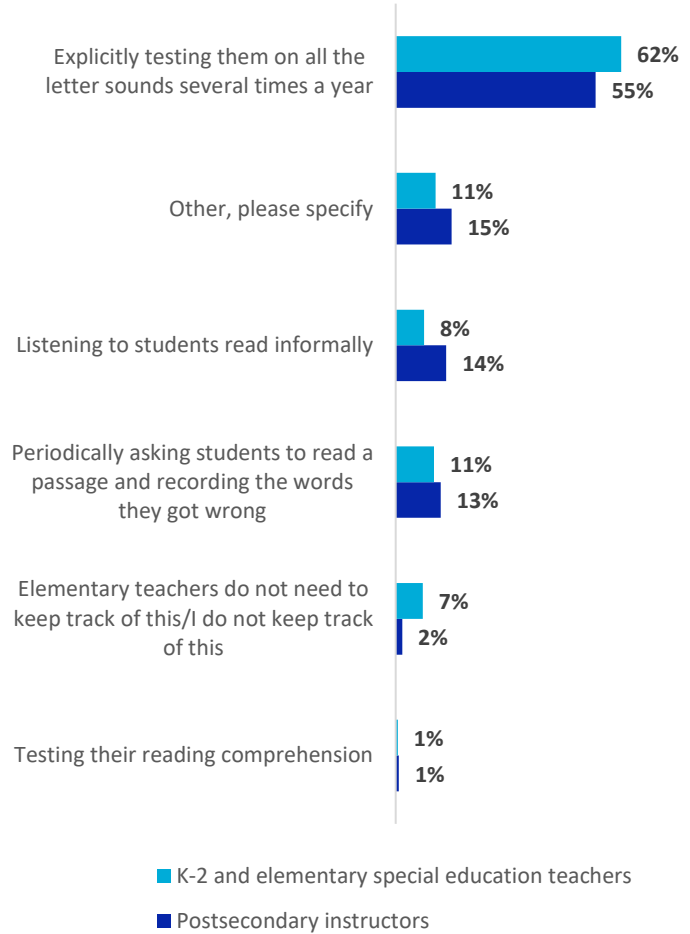
## Tracking Letter Sounds

For this survey question, elementary teachers were asked: *How do you keep track of which letter sounds individual students in your classroom have mastered?*

Postsecondary instructors were asked: *What's the best way for elementary school teachers to keep track of which letter sounds individual students in their classrooms have mastered?*

Most survey respondents use or support the use of explicit testing, multiple times per year to track letter-sound mastery.

### What's the best way for elementary school teachers to keep track of which letter sounds individual students in their classrooms have mastered?





# Teacher Knowledge and Perceptions

## National Reading Panel Report

Convened by Congress in 1999, the National Reading Panel consisted of 15 members including reading researchers, a middle school teacher, an elementary principal and a CPA/parent.

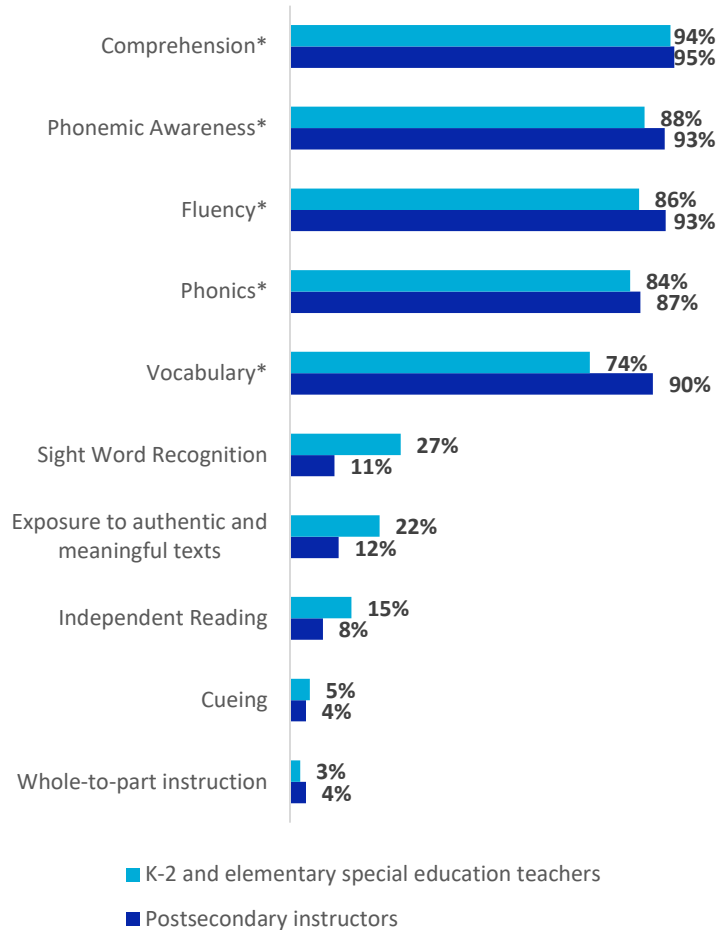
The panel’s 2000 report identified the following five skills as key components of effective early reading instruction:

- Phonemic awareness (the knowledge that spoken words are comprised of smaller segments called phonemes)
- Phonics (the knowledge that letters represent phonemes and that these sounds can be combined to form words)
- Fluency (the ability to read easily, accurately, quickly, and with expression and understanding)
- Vocabulary (learning new words)
- Comprehension (the ability to demonstrate understanding, often through summarization)

The report — or more specifically a widely disseminated summary — went on to influence multiple policies, including the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the associated Reading First initiative. Its results continue to resonate to this day. Criticisms of the report have included the contentions that it relied on an overly constrained set of research studies, and that its influence is overly concentrated on a summary that mis-stated some key findings of the complete report.

Although at the time of the survey, the report was nearly two decades old, the vast majority of postsecondary respondents (78 percent) correctly identified all five elements of the National Reading Panel report. A smaller share of K-2 and elementary special education teachers (55 percent) got all five elements right.

**What are the five essential components of reading instruction, as identified by the National Reading Panel? (Select FIVE.)**



Note: An asterisk indicates that an answer is correct.

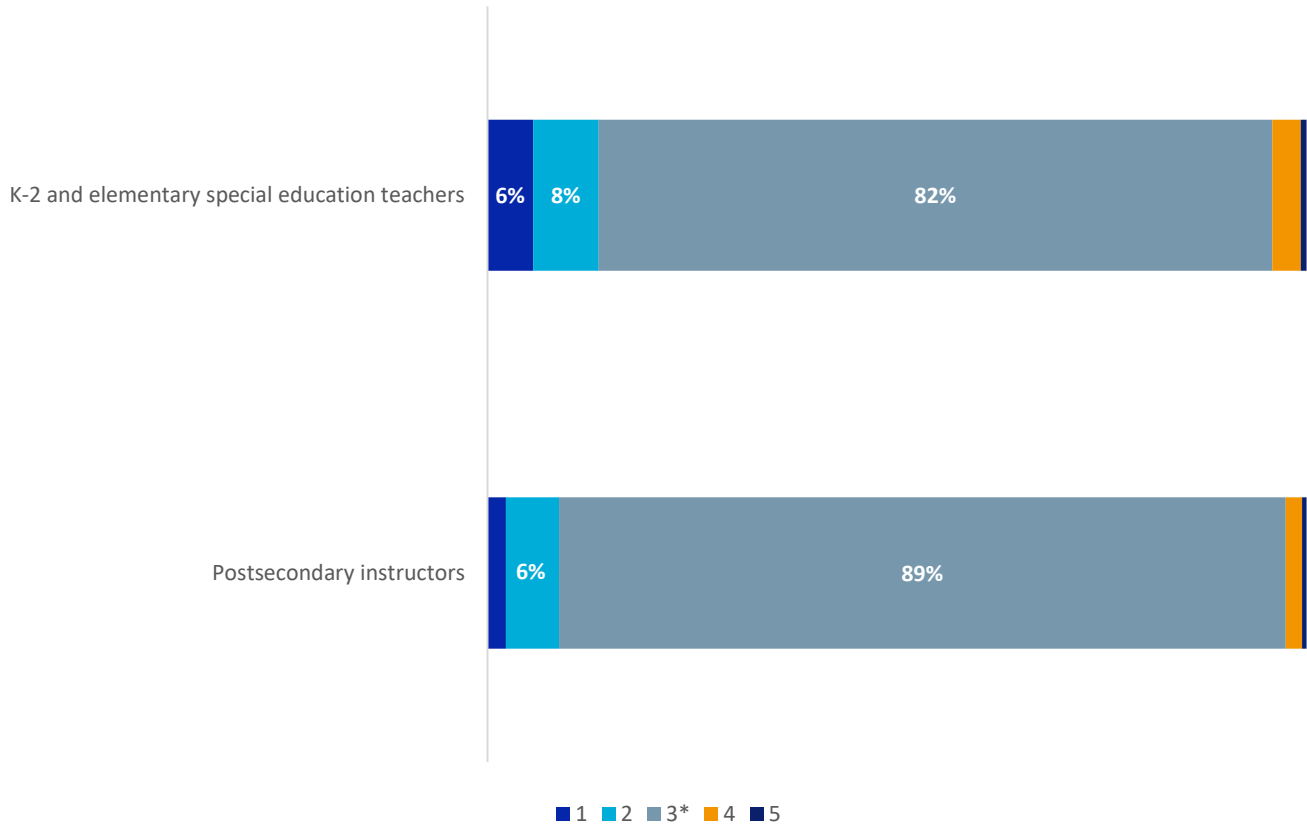
## Teacher Knowledge of Phonemes

A phoneme is the smallest unit of spoken language. English has 44 phonemes. While some are represented by a single letter (e.g., the “p” sound in shape), others are represented by letter pairs (e.g., “sh” for the beginning of the word shape). Additionally, some letters are associated with multiple sounds. For instance, the letter “a” sounds different in “cat” than in “shape.” Phonemic awareness helps beginning readers make connections between spoken and written language.

On the survey, the vast majority of survey respondents correctly identified the number of phonemes in the word shape (three — “sh,” “ay,” and “p”).

Although nearly all identified the correct response, instructors with less experience in higher education were more likely to get the answer right: Ninety-five percent of those with less than five years in the field responded correctly as compared to 79 percent with more than 20 years of experience. Among K-2 and elementary special education teachers, teachers with different levels of experienced responded correctly at similar rates.

### How many phonemes are in the word “shape”?



## Teacher Knowledge of Open Syllables

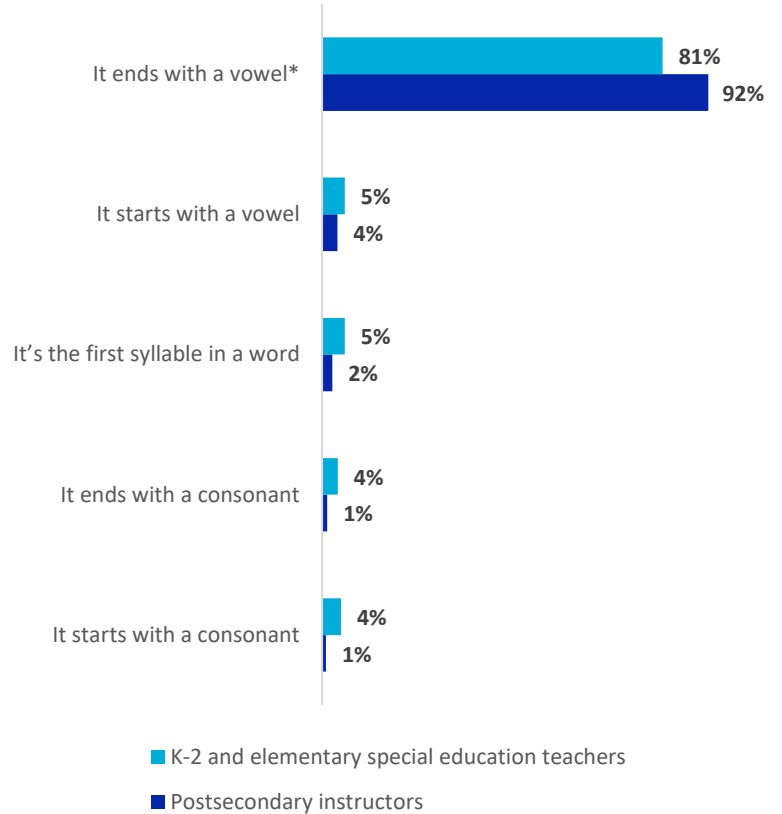
An open syllable ends with a vowel, resulting in a long vowel sound, as in “no” or “we.” By contrast, a closed syllable ends with a consonant, as in “cat” or “sit.” When beginning readers understand this concept, it can be easier for them to know whether a vowel sound is long or short.

The vast majority of educators correctly responded that an open syllable ends with a vowel. However, postsecondary instructors were more likely to get the answer right than were K-2 or elementary special education teachers.

For this survey question, elementary teachers were asked: *To explain what an open syllable is, a teacher should tell students \_\_\_\_\_.*

Postsecondary instructors were asked: *To explain what an open syllable is, elementary school teachers should tell students \_\_\_\_\_.*

### To explain what an open syllable is, elementary school teachers should tell students \_\_\_\_\_.



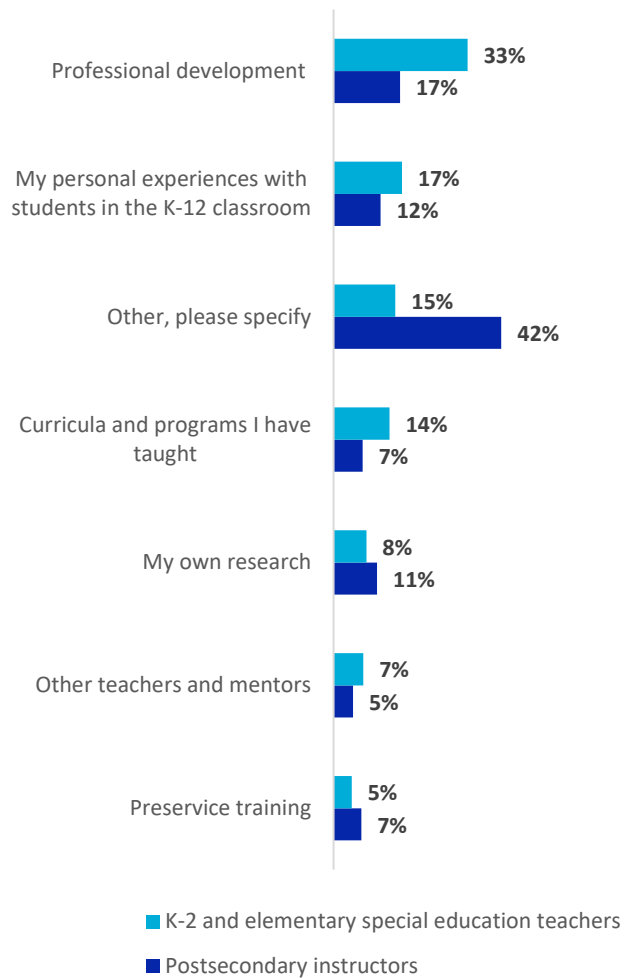
## Sources of Reading Knowledge

Asked where they learned most of what they know about reading, K-2 and elementary special education teachers are likeliest to identify professional development as the source of that knowledge. Postsecondary instructors are most likely to select “other, please specify.” Many who selected that option said that they learned most of what they know in graduate school.

Compared to their peers with less K-12 experience, postsecondary instructors who have spent more than 20 years working in elementary and/or secondary schools are significantly more likely to say that their top source of knowledge is their personal experience with students in K-12 classrooms (25 percent versus 9 percent).

Less experienced elementary teachers are significantly more likely to identify other teachers or mentors as their top source of reading knowledge. Other teachers/mentors are the top knowledge source for 21 percent of K-12 and elementary special education teachers with less than 11 years in the field but just four percent of peers with more than 20 years of experience.

### Where did you learn most of what you know about reading?



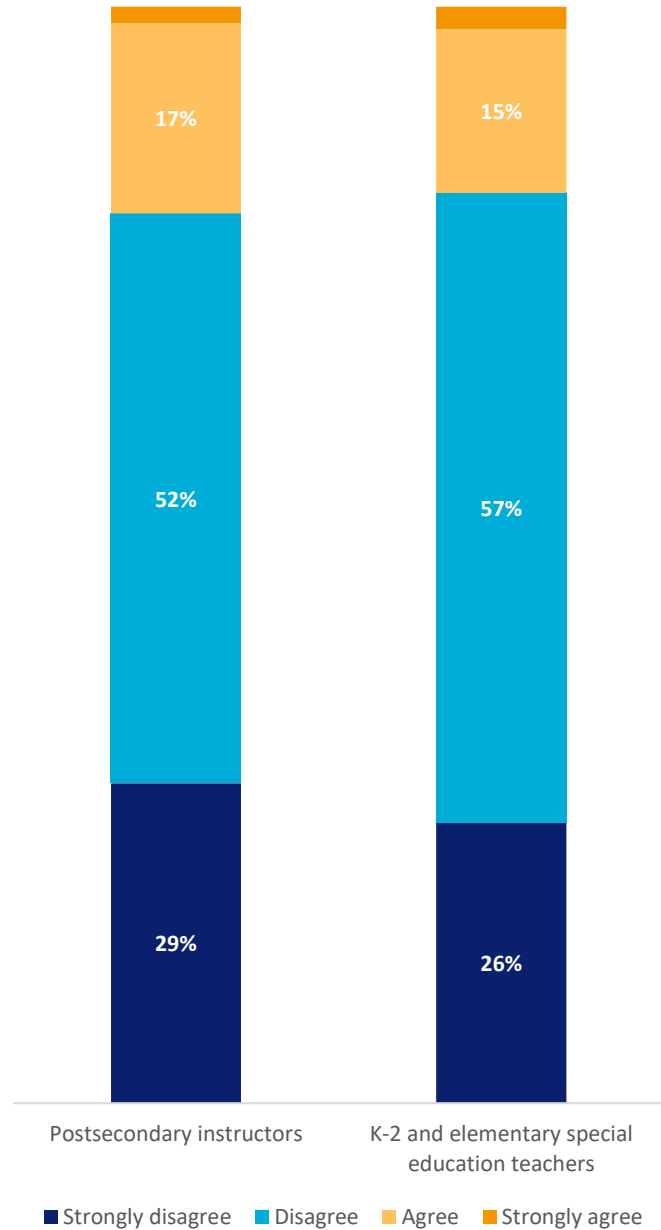
## Self-Taught Readers

Although babies learn to speak without formal lessons, research indicates that most children need explicit instruction to learn to read.

The vast majority of survey respondents share this perception. However, just a minority (less than 30 percent) strongly disagree that most students will learn to read on their own given the proper books and time.

Compared to their peers at higher-poverty schools, teachers at elementary schools where half or less of the students are low income are more likely to say most students can/will learn to read without explicit instruction (21 percent versus 13 percent).

**Read the following statement and select your level of agreement/disagreement.**  
**Most students will learn to read on their own if given the proper books and time to read them.**



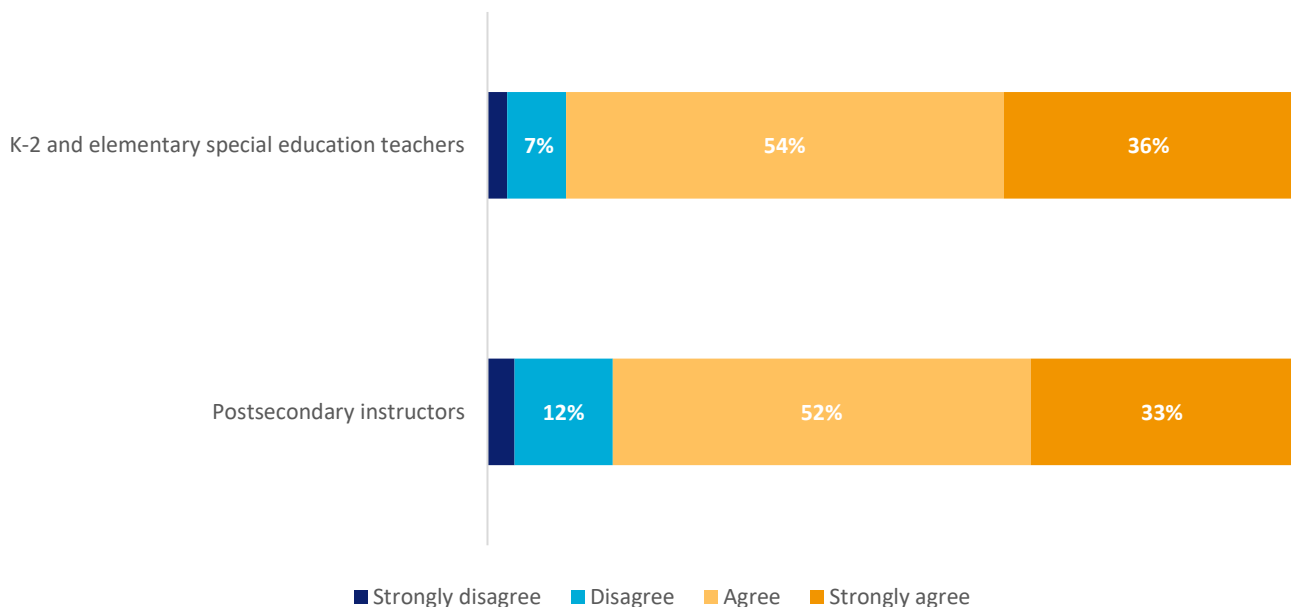
## Instruction on Reading Words

The vast majority of survey respondents say children need direct, systematic instruction to learn to read words. But well under half strongly agree that this is the case.

Southern K-2 and elementary special education teachers are most likely to share this belief (96 percent) followed by Northeasterners (92 percent) and Midwesterners (87 percent). Westerners are least likely (85 percent). Compared to their peers at more affluent schools, elementary educators at majority low-income schools are also more likely to say that explicit, systematic instruction is necessary if children are to learn to read words (93 percent versus 88 percent).

The more experience they have in higher education, the less likely instructors are to perceive that children need direct, systematic instruction to learn to read words. Seventy-four percent of instructors with more than 20 years of experience in higher education say direct, systematic instruction is necessary as compared to 91 percent of those with five years or less in the field.

**Read the following statement and select your level of agreement/disagreement. Students need direct instruction, done in a systematic way, to learn how to read words.**

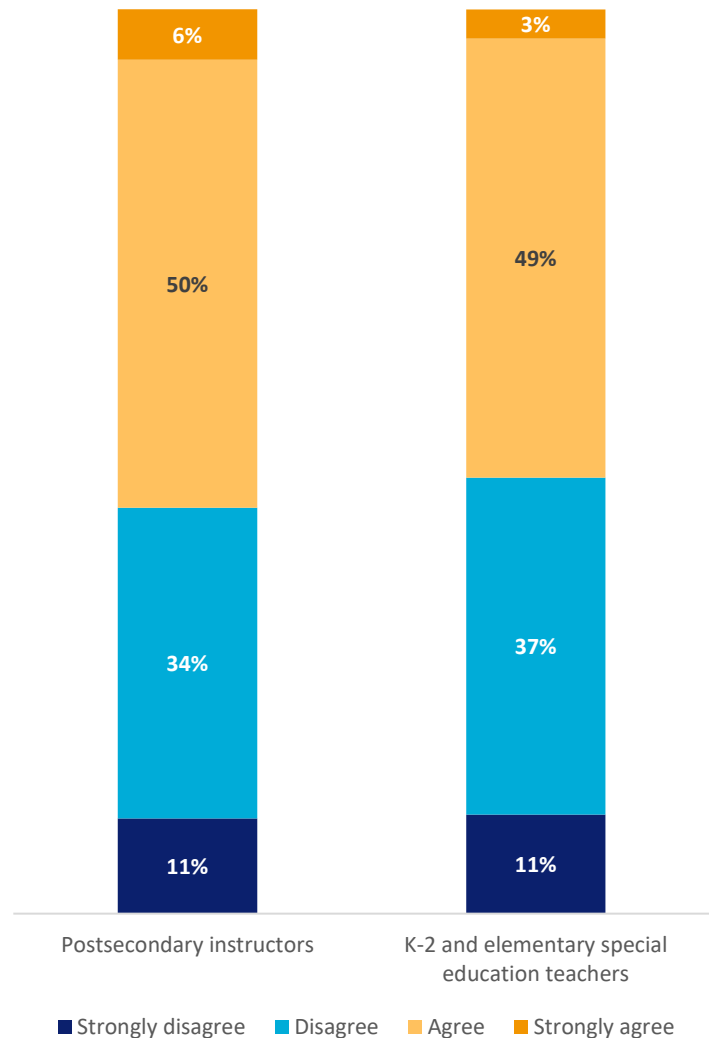


## Phonics and Comprehension

Most survey respondents say that students can understand written texts with unfamiliar words even if they don't have a good grasp of phonics. However, less than 10 percent strongly agree that this is the case.

For postsecondary respondents, the perception that students who don't grasp phonics can understand unfamiliar words in texts is more common among adjunct (74 percent) and full-time, non-tenure-track instructors like lecturers (60 percent) and less common among tenured (50 percent) and tenure-track faculty (49 percent).

**Read the following statement and select your level of agreement/disagreement. It is possible for students to understand written texts with unfamiliar words even if they don't have a good grasp of phonics.**

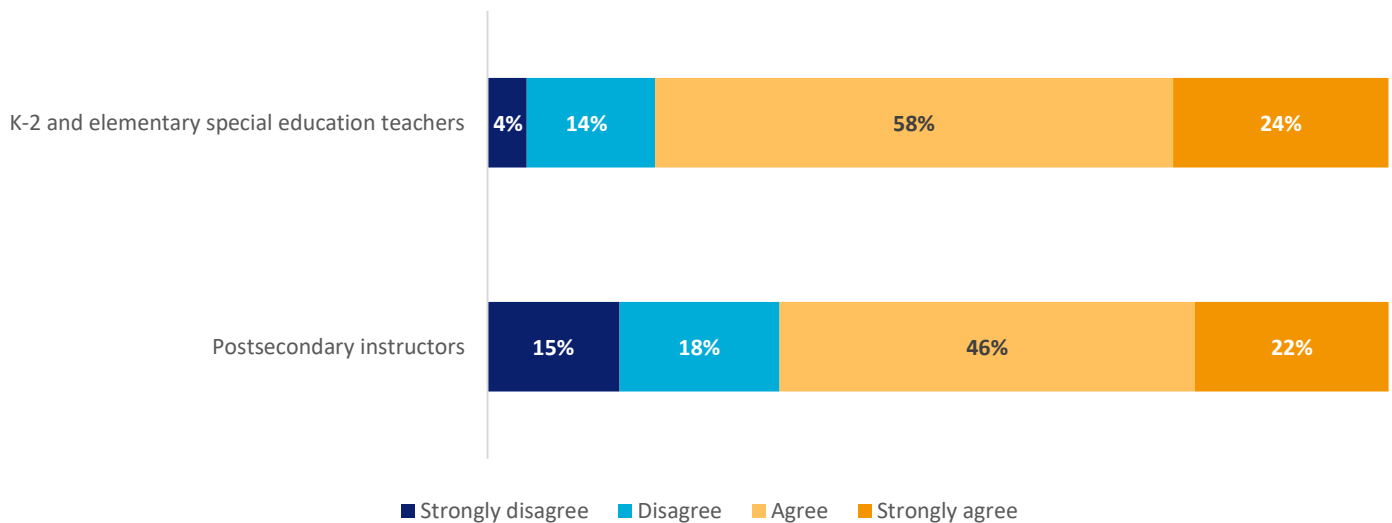


## Reliance on Context and Visual Cues

Cognitive and neuroscience researchers have found that skilled readers are more likely than beginning or struggling readers to sound out unfamiliar words rather than guess based on clues such as context or pictures. However, most survey respondents say skilled readers do rely on context clues and visual cues (and not just letters) to know what a word says.

Compared to their peers with less experience in K-12, postsecondary instructors with more experience in elementary and/or secondary schools are more likely to associate context clues and visual clues with reading proficiency. Eighty-six percent of postsecondary instructors with more than 20 years of K-12 experience say that skilled readers rely on context and visuals as compared to 62 percent of those who spent five or less years in K-12 and 60 percent of those with no K-12 experience. This perception is also more common among postsecondary instructors whose highest degree is a master's (81 percent) than among those with a PhD or EdD (64 percent). It is significantly more common among adjunct/part-time instructors (82 percent) than among full-time non-tenure track (67 percent), tenured (62 percent), or tenure-track (68 percent) faculty.

**Read the following statement  
and select your level of agreement/disagreement.  
Skilled readers rely on context clues and visual cues such as pictures  
and diagrams — rather than just letters — to know what a word says.**

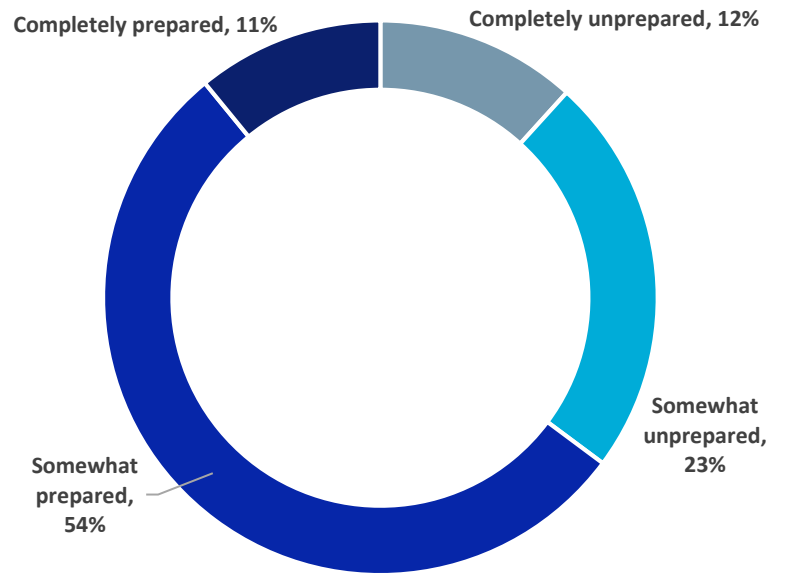




## Preparation to Teach Early Reading

When they finished their pre-service preparation, most respondents to the elementary teachers' survey (65 percent) said they felt prepared to teach early reading. However, just 11 percent felt completely prepared. Twelve percent felt completely unprepared.

### How prepared did elementary school teachers feel to teach early reading when they finished their preservice teacher-preparation programs?



## Curricula, Programs, and Resources

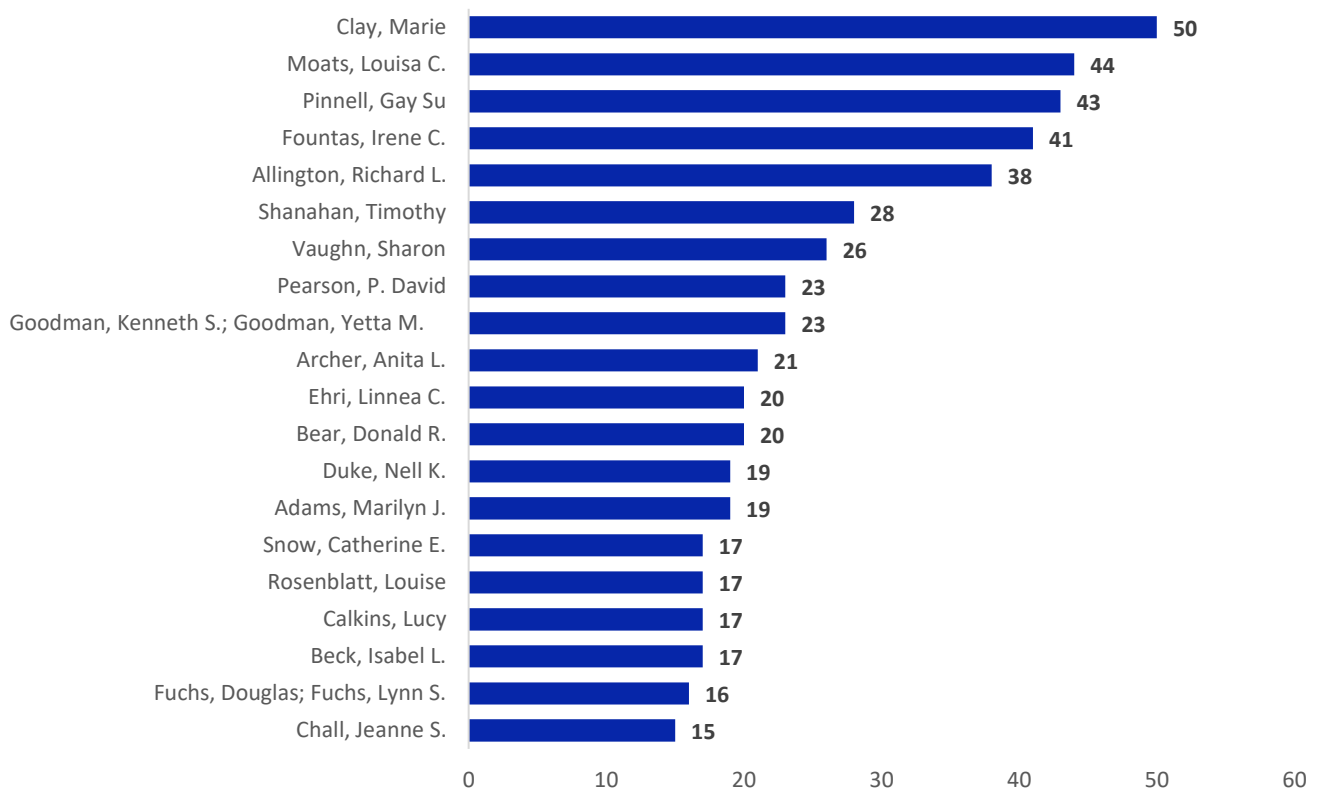
### Reading Researchers Introduced in Postsecondary Classes

Marie Clay is the researcher most likely to be introduced into postsecondary courses taught by survey respondents. Clay, who spent much of her career as a professor in the School of Education at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, died in 2007. She is perhaps best known for creating Reading Recovery, an intensive program in which educators work daily with struggling early readers to bring them up to speed before they fall too far behind.

Survey respondents are second most likely to introduce the work of Louisa Moats. A consultant for the curriculum company Voyager Sopris, Moats has also been a teacher, a school psychologist, and a psychologist in private practice. She created a Voyager Sopris professional development program called LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling).

In a 2007 report written for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-leaning think tank, Moats was critical of Clay's Reading Recovery program, classifying it as an approach that "may pay lip service to reading science, but [that fails] to incorporate the content and instructional methods proven to work best with students learning to read." A 2016 meta-analysis of 16 of 203 Reading Recovery studies that met the authors' standards (e.g., experimental or quasi-experimental designs) found that the program had significant, positive, and large effects on literacy.

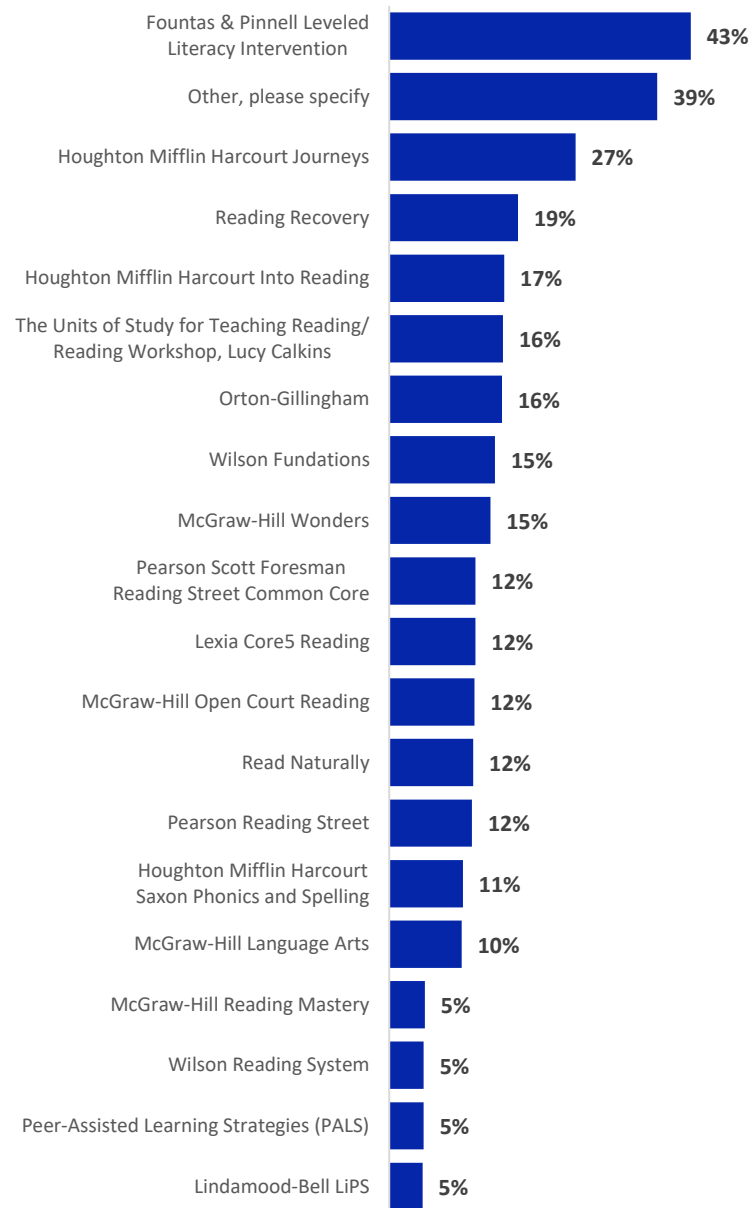
### What reading researchers' work do you introduce to your classes? [Number of postsecondary instructors who mentioned each researcher]



## Early Reading Instruction Curricula

The survey asked elementary teachers to list all the core or supplemental programs, textbooks, or curricula they had used in their classrooms for early reading instruction. Fountas & Pinnell Levelled Literacy Intervention was the most frequently used resource. Published by Heinemann, the program uses texts that are supposed to be at the right level for students in homogenous instructional groups. At the lowest levels, the books follow predictable sentence structures, and pictures are literal representations of the text. On the one hand, books like this, which are used by many popular reading programs, can demonstrate that words have consistent meanings while providing images that help children link meanings to words. On the other hand, critics say this approach promotes memorization or guessing (based on pictures) and that beginning readers would be better served with decodable books that encourage students to sound out unfamiliar words based on phonics patterns they've learned. The Fountas & Pinnell program does include daily letter and word practice. Compared to their peers at higher-poverty schools, teachers at schools where half or less of the students live in poverty are more likely to say they've used Fountas & Pinnell (50 percent versus 37 percent). However, Reading Recovery, which also uses leveled texts, is more frequently used by teachers at the highest poverty schools (23 percent) than by those at lower-poverty schools (14 percent). Fountas & Pinnell is also less frequently used by teachers in smaller districts with enrollments under 2,500 (40 percent) than by their peers in districts with 10,000 or more students (54 percent). It's used by more than half of suburban teachers (54 percent) as compared to 48 percent of urban teachers and just 36 percent of their rural peers. Finally, the program is most common in the Northeast, where 63 percent of teachers have used it, and least common in the West, where 33 percent of educators use it. (Use rates are 51 percent among Midwestern teachers and 36 percent in the South).

### What core or supplemental reading programs, textbooks, or curricula have you used for early reading instruction in your classroom? Select all that apply.

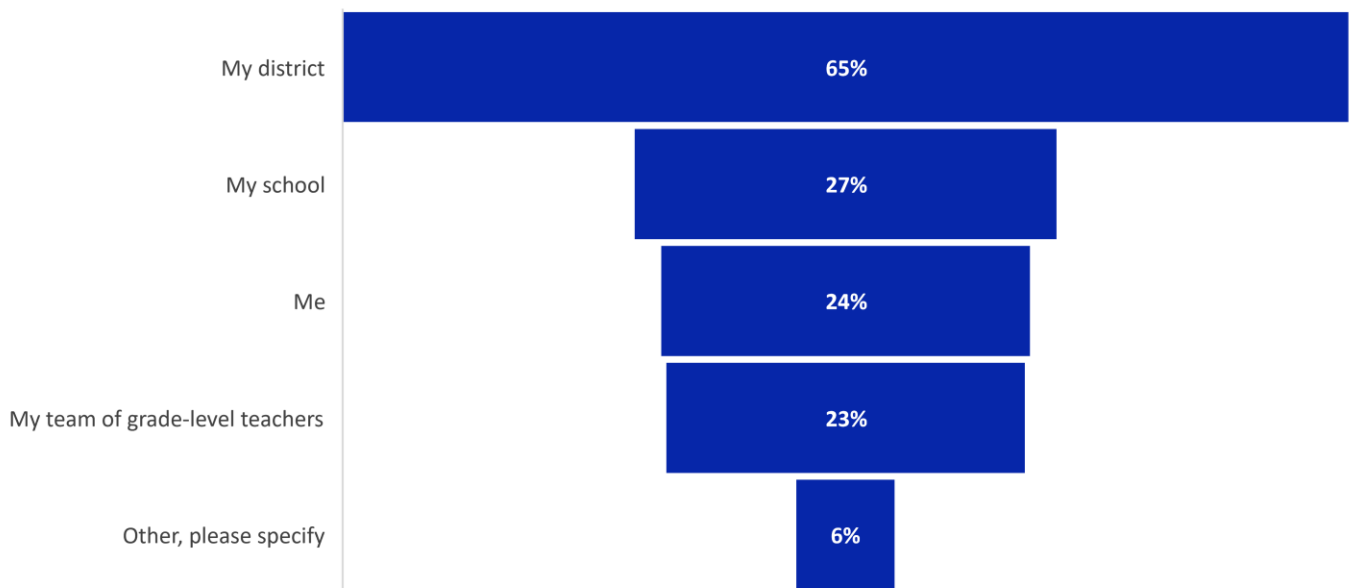


Note: Chart shows items cited by five percent of respondents or more.

## Early Reading Program Selection

Nearly two-thirds of K-2 and elementary special education teachers say their districts select the primary programs and materials they use to teach children to read. However, that percentage varies from 71 percent in the South, 70 percent in the Northeast and 68 percent in the West to just 57 percent in the Midwest. Nearly three-quarters of suburban teachers (74 percent) and urban teachers (73 percent) say their districts pick their materials as compared to 58 percent of their rural peers. Teachers in smaller districts with enrollments under 2,500 — which are more likely to be rural — also report more autonomy over their reading program selection. Less than half (47 percent) say their districts pick their programs as compared to 83 percent of educators in the largest districts with enrollments of 10,000 or more. Nearly 1 in 3 smaller-district teachers say their team of grade-level teachers picks programs as compared to 13 percent of their peers in the largest districts. And 37 percent of smaller-district teachers say their school selects programs as compared to 21 percent of those in large districts.

### When you teach students to read, who selects your primary reading programs and materials? Select all that apply.

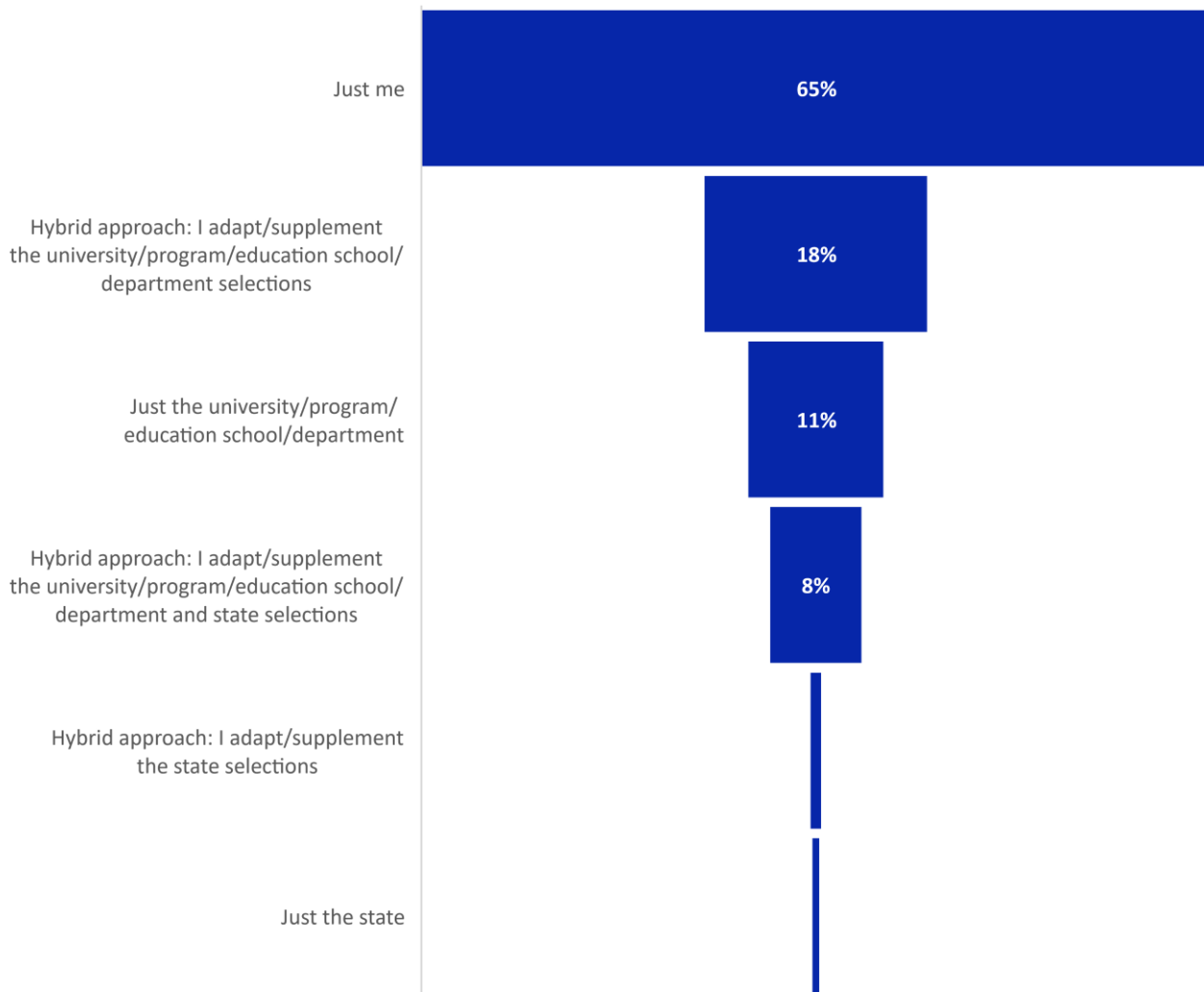


## Early Reading Course Material Selection

Nearly two-thirds of postsecondary instructors say that they alone select the books, articles, and other materials they use for their early reading instruction courses. However, this varies by region. For example, 23 percent of Westerners say their university, program, school, or department alone selects these materials as compared to 12 percent of Southerners, 10 percent of Northeasterners, and four percent of Midwesterners.

Compared to instructors whose most advanced degree is a Master's, respondents with PhDs or EdDs are also significantly more likely to select all their own course materials (70 percent versus 49 percent). Institution type matters too. Twenty-one percent of instructors in which the most advanced degree offered is a Master's say they adapt a university and state-created syllabus. That percentage falls to 5 percent at PhD/EdD-granting institutions.

### Who selects the books, articles, and other materials used for the course(s) in which you teach early reading? Select all that apply.



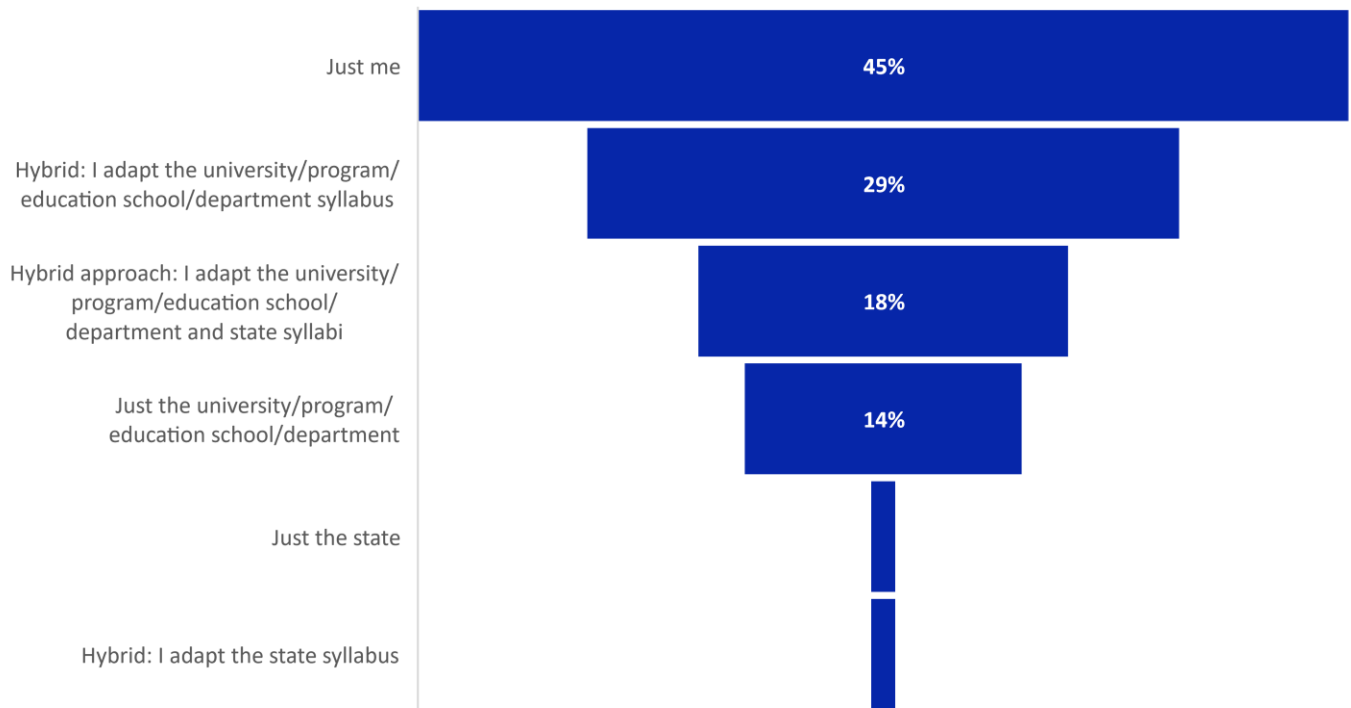
## Early Reading Syllabus Creation

Asked who writes the course syllabus when they teach early reading, postsecondary survey respondents are most likely to say “just me.” This fits with universities’ emphasis on academic freedom, which typically permits instructors leeway when it comes to what they teach and how, especially for the tenured and tenure-track faculty who comprised the majority of survey respondents. In fact, more than half of tenure-track faculty (57 percent) and nearly half of tenured faculty (48 percent) say they write their own syllabi as compared to 40 percent of full-time, non-tenure track instructors and 31 percent of adjuncts. Along those same lines, 35 percent of full-time, non-tenure track instructors and 23 percent of adjuncts say they adapt a syllabus compiled by university and/or state officials. That percentage is just 10 percent for tenure-track faculty and 13 percent of those with tenure.

Syllabus control also varies by institution type. For instance, 6 percent of respondents from private, for-profit institutions say the state alone writes their early reading syllabi as compared to 1 percent from public institutions and zero percent from private, not-for-profits. And half of respondents from PhD/EdD-granting institutions have sole control over their syllabi as compared to 29 percent of those from institutions in which the Master’s is the most advanced degree available.

Finally, syllabus control differs by levels of experience in both K-12 and higher education. Seventy percent of those with no experience in K-12 have total syllabus control as compared to 49 percent of respondents with five years or less of experience, 47 percent of those with six to 20 years of experience, and 30 percent with more than 20 years in elementary and/or secondary schools. Respondents with less experience in higher education by contrast are more likely to say they adapt a university syllabus: 39 percent of instructors with five years or less in postsecondary education adapt a university syllabus as compared to 27 percent of instructors with 20 years or more in higher education.

### Who writes the syllabus for the course(s) in which you teach early reading? Select all that apply.

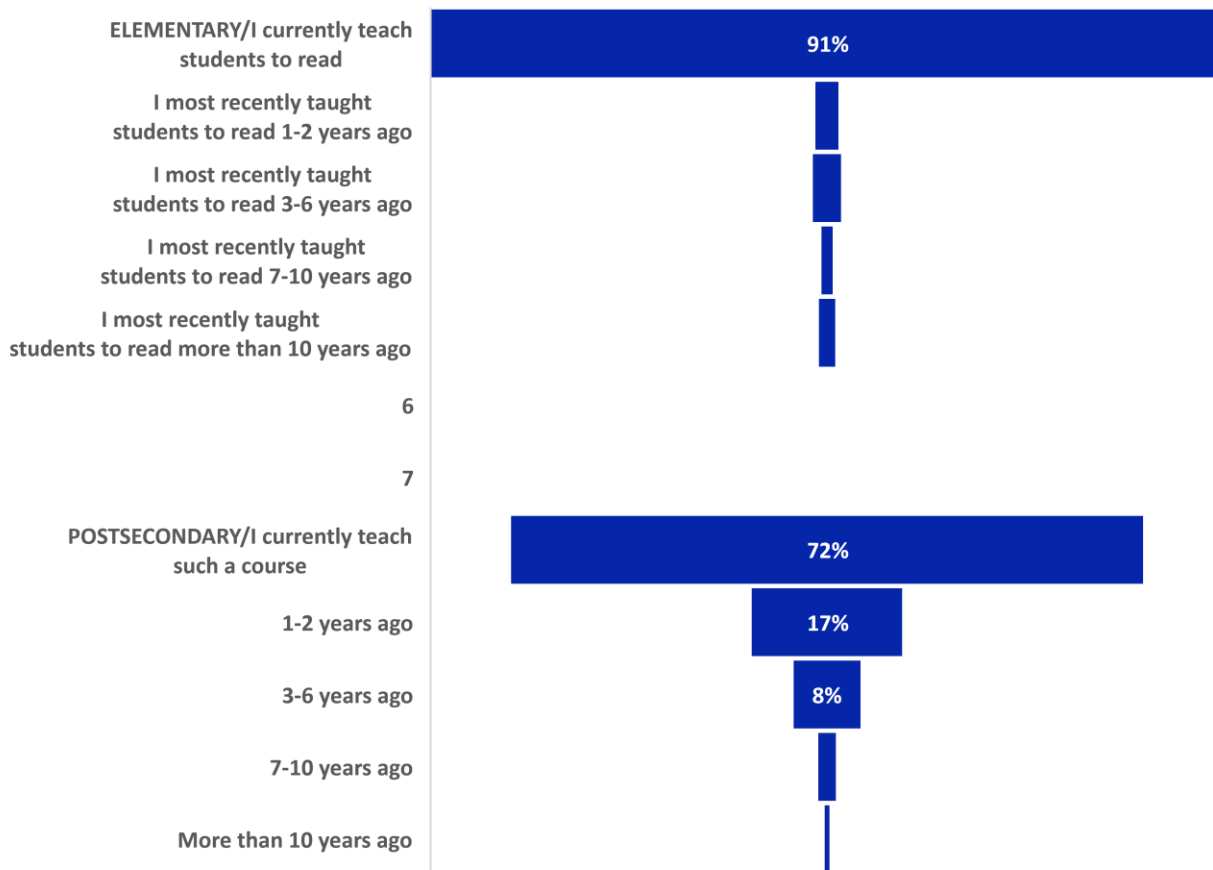


# Demographics

## Experience Teaching Reading or Reading Instruction

The vast majority of survey respondents are either currently teaching students to read or currently teaching a course that covers reading or literacy instruction.

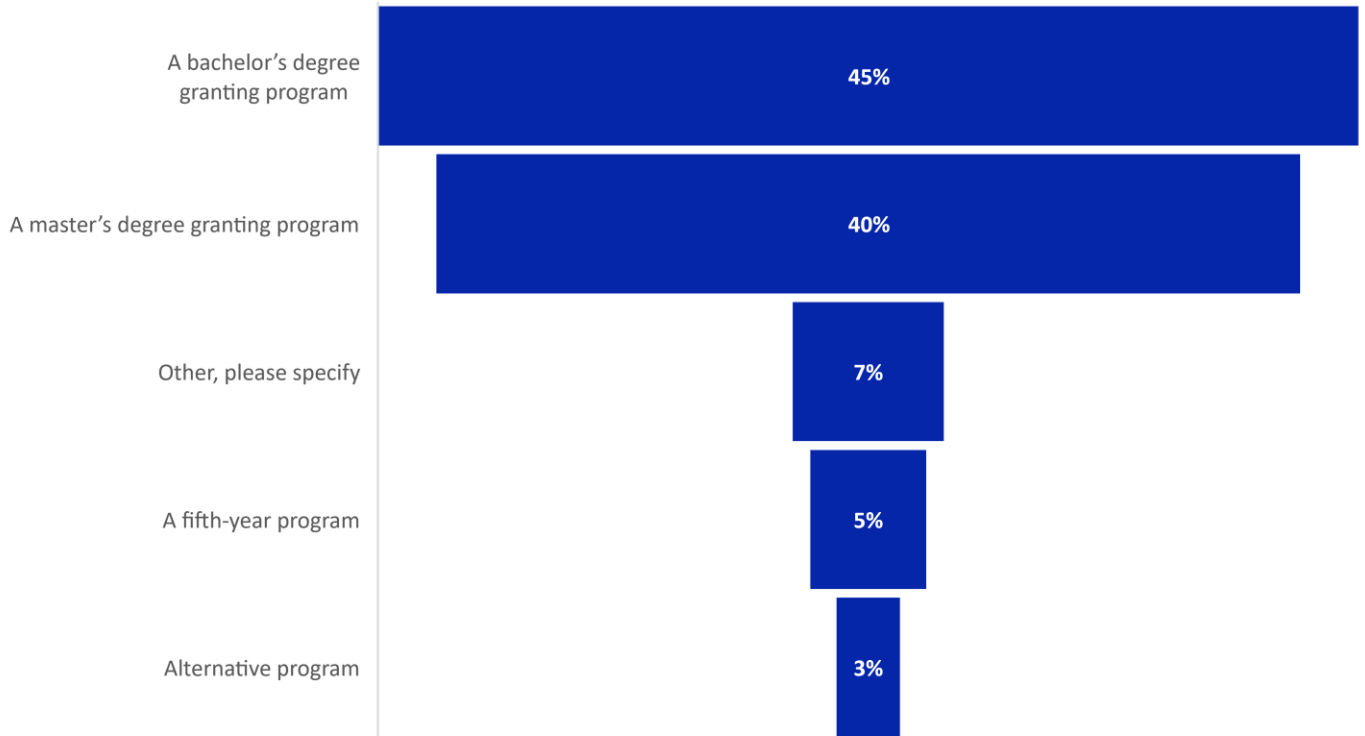
**Experience teaching students to read/teaching a course that covers reading or literacy instruction**



## Preservice Education

Most elementary survey respondents attended a traditional bachelor's or master's-granting teacher education program rather than pursuing an alternative path. This makes sense given the relatively high levels of experience in the field: alternative pathways have grown more common in recent years.

**What type of preservice teacher-preparation program did elementary school teachers attend?**

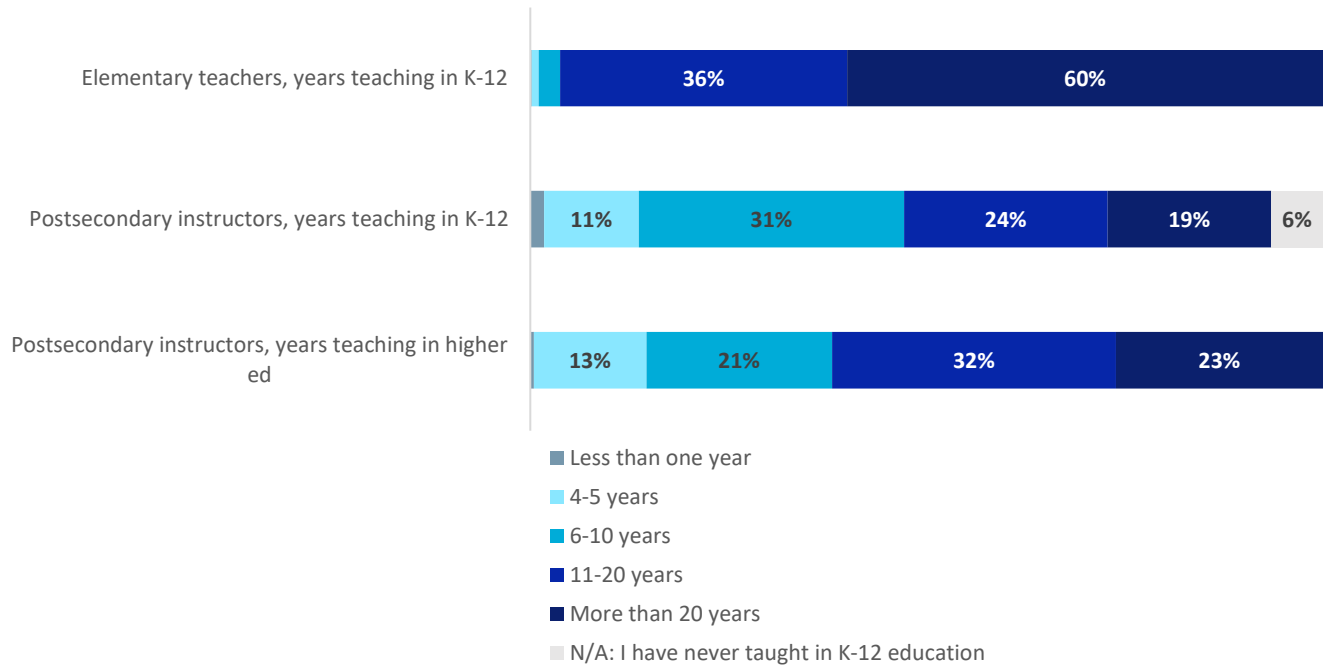




## Years of Experience in the Field

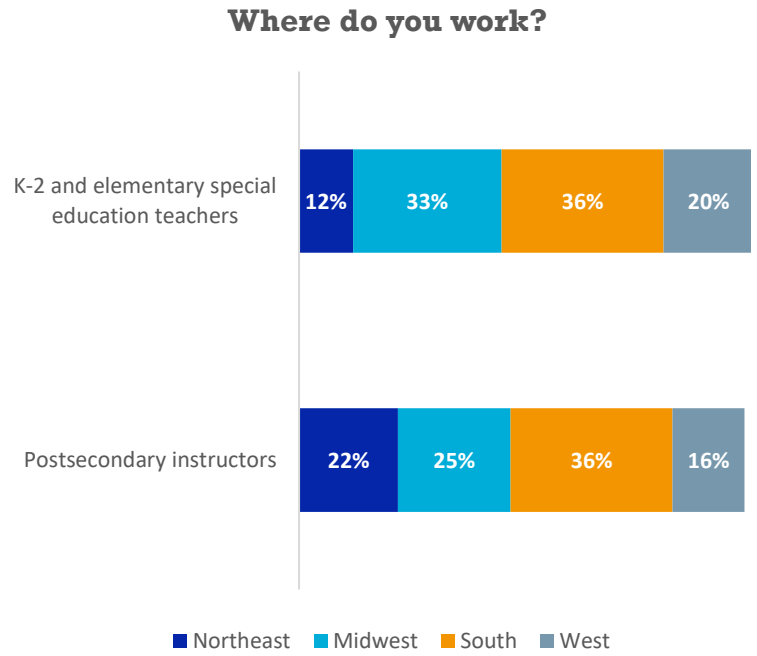
Most of the elementary teachers who responded to the survey have more than 20 years of experience in K-12 education. Almost everyone who responded to the postsecondary survey has at least some experience in K-12 as well. Postsecondary instructors who responded to the survey are most likely to have spent 11-20 years in higher education.

### Years of teaching experience for elementary and postsecondary survey respondents



## Region

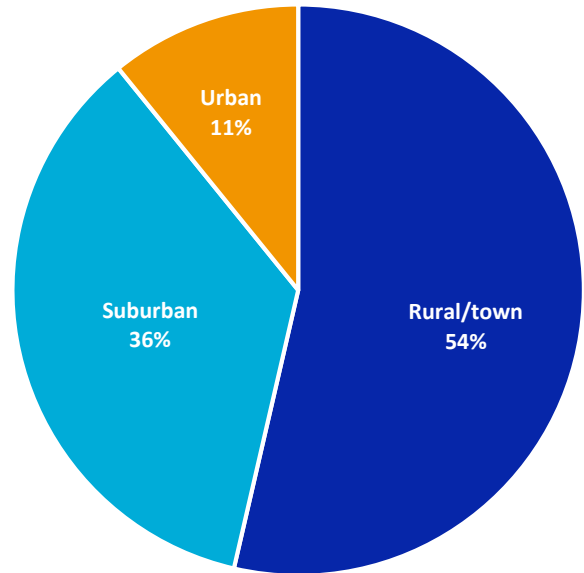
Like the population of the United States as a whole, survey respondents are most likely to be located in the Southern United States. K-2 and elementary special education teachers are least likely to be found in the Northeast. Due to the relatively high concentration of universities and colleges in that region, postsecondary instructors are least likely to be located not in the Northeast but in the Western United States.



## Locale

Most respondents to the elementary school survey work in rural areas or in towns. The postsecondary survey did not ask about locale.

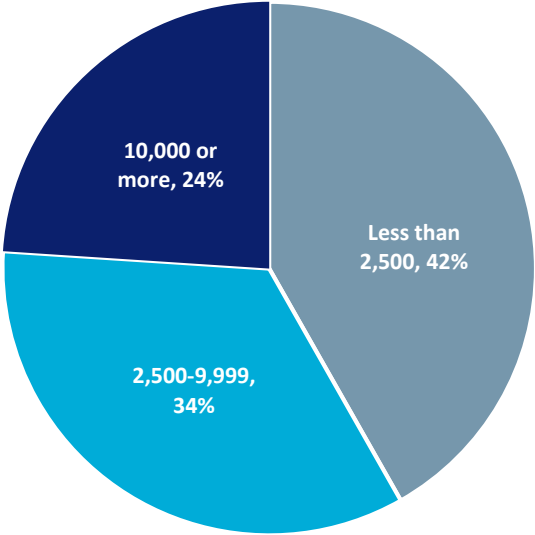
**Which of the following best describes the location of your school?**



**District Size**

Most school districts in the United States are small. Accordingly, elementary school survey respondents are most likely to work in districts with fewer than 2,500 students.

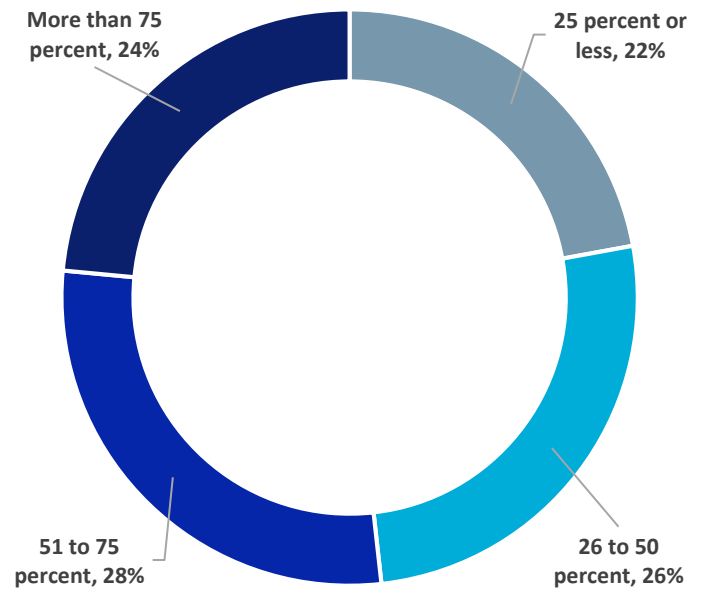
**Approximately how many students are enrolled in your district?**



## Poverty Rate

Just over half of elementary school survey respondents work in schools in which most students come from low-income families.

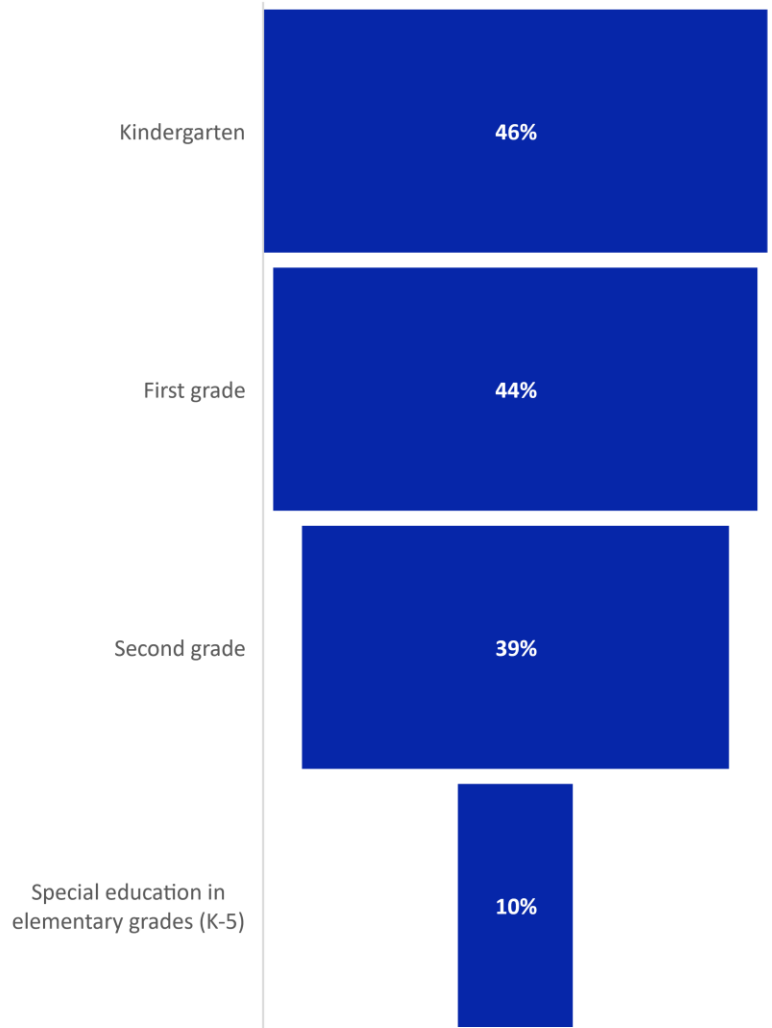
**Which of the following best describes the percentage of students from low-income families at your school?**



## Elementary Teachers: Grade Levels Taught

Most respondents to the elementary school survey teach or have taught Kindergarten, first or second grade. Ten percent teach or have taught special education.

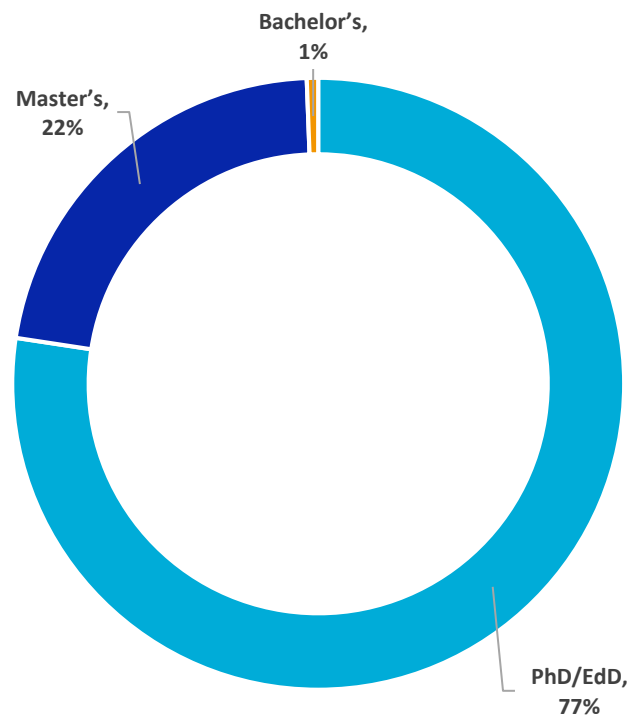
### What grade level(s) have you taught in the past 10 years? Select all that apply.



## Education Level: Postsecondary Instructors

More than three-quarters of postsecondary survey respondents have PhDs or EdDs. Most of the remainder say their highest degree is a Master's.

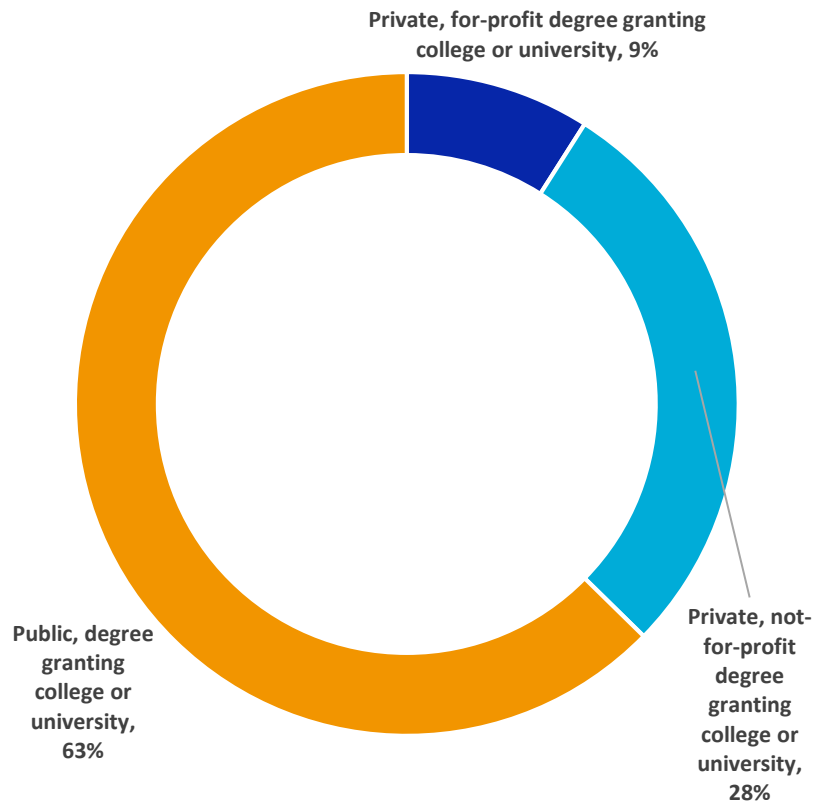
**What is the highest degree you have obtained?**



## Type of Postsecondary Institution

Most postsecondary survey respondents work at public institutions with 28 percent at private, not-for-profits, and 9 percent at for-profit universities or colleges.

### Which of the following best describes the institution where you teach?

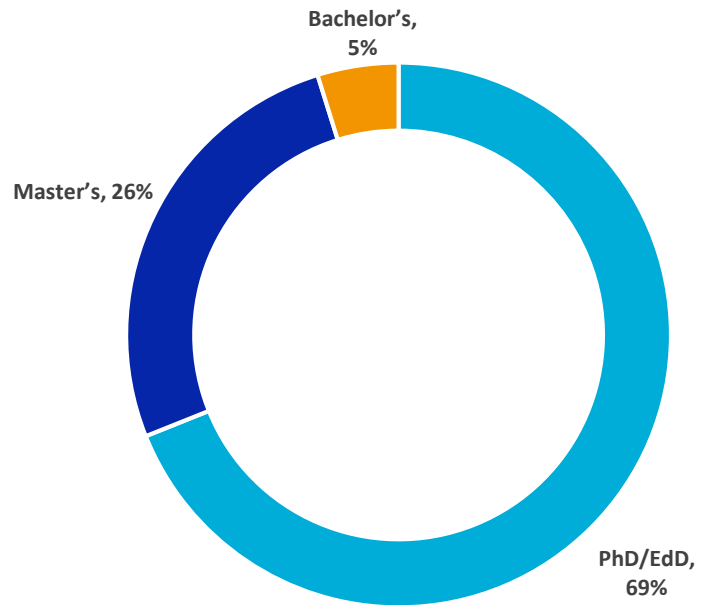




## Highest Degree Granted by Institution

More than two-thirds of postsecondary survey respondents are affiliated with institutions that grant PhDs or EdDs. Most of the remainder work at schools in which a master's is the highest degree conferred.

### What is the highest degree granted by the institution where you teach?



## Teacher Education Program Size

Two hundred is the median enrollment of postsecondary survey respondents' teacher education programs. Program size varied widely, however, as evidenced by the fact that the mean, which is sensitive to outliers, is 585.

### How many students are currently enrolled in your institution's teacher education program?

