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ATPE Surveys K-3 Educators on HB 3 Reading Academies Requirement

After receiving concerning feedback from educators regarding implementation of a recent state law on Reading Academies, the Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) conducted a survey of its members to gather more detail. The survey was completed by nearly 1,000 K-3 teachers and administrators and provides insight into how the Reading Academies are experienced by educators, as well as implications for policy changes to improve these experiences and student outcomes.

Background

In 2019, the 86th Texas Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 3 by Rep. Dan Huberty (R-Kingwood), a comprehensive school finance and reform bill. Aiming to prioritize reading instruction, part of the bill required school districts and open-enrollment charter schools (local education agencies or LEAs) to ensure that every K-3 classroom teacher and principal attend a teacher literacy achievement academy (often called a Reading Academy) “not later than” the 2021-2022 school year. In 2021, this deadline was extended by HB 1525 of the 87th Legislature to “not later than” the 2022-2023 school year. A [description](#) on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website interprets this deadline to mean by the end of the 2022-2023 school year.

There are few exemptions for educators required to complete the Reading Academies, and there is no “test-out” option. All K-3 teachers, including special education teachers, librarians who provide core instruction or intervention to K-3 students, and literacy specialists who see students in small groups, are required to receive the training. Assistant principals, instructional coaches, educators who completed the requirements of the 2018-19 READ Grant, and “specials” teachers who hold an “all-level certification in art, health education, music, physical education, speech communication and theatre arts, or theatre” may be exempted. The all-level certification tests were adopted between 2004 and 2008.

TEA suggests that funding sources such as the Early Education Allotment, Dyslexia Allotment, Basic Allotment, Bilingual Allotment, Compensatory Education funds, or Coordinated Early Intervening Services funds can be used to pay authorized providers for the Reading Academies training and to pay teachers for their time. According to TEA, the training is designed to be 60 hours (or 42 hours for the administrator path) and completed in no more than 10 full days over an 11-month period.

Additionally, as of January 2021, all aspiring PK-6 teachers must pass the new Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam for certification. This includes

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teachers seeking certification in Early Childhood (EC)-3, EC-6 core subjects, 4-8 core subjects, 4-8 English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR), and 4-8 ELAR/Social Studies (SS). TEA [asserts](#) that the Reading Academies content is meant to build upon the STR content a new teacher learns in their educator preparation program (EPP). Therefore, once hired by an LEA, a new teacher who has passed the STR exam must also complete the Reading Academies training. Teachers who took the STR exam began employment in the 2021-2022 school year and would thus have to complete the Reading Academies training by the end of their second year of teaching in 2022-2023.

ATPE's Survey

After passage of HB 3, ATPE began receiving inquiries from educators about the requirements of the Reading Academies law. Educators shared that:

- The timeline for completion of the Reading Academies was too short (which prompted our advocacy for the deadline extension in HB 1525);
- The hours required for the training were too long;
- It was unclear whether specials area teachers were exempt;
- There were errors and bias contained in the content of the modules; and
- The extensive content was repetitive for both new teachers who had just passed the STR exam and seasoned teachers.

In response, ATPE created and administered a survey of its members to gather more information about the implementation of the training and its impact on educators. The survey was open from Dec. 1-17, 2021, and completed by 975 educators who indicated they served students in grades K-3. Respondents included math, science, social studies, ELAR, special education, gifted and talented, ESL, Pre-K, and specials teachers, as well as dyslexia therapists, reading interventionists, principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, librarians, social and life skills teachers, and other educators.

Results

We gathered information about how educators experienced the value of the Reading Academies, the time commitment required to complete the training, whether they were compensated, the time frame in which districts expected educators to complete the training, whether specials teachers were exempt, and educators' perceptions of how the content compared to the STR. We analyzed the results based on whether the respondent had completed the training (20%), was still working on it (65%), or had not started it yet (15%).

Value, Time, and Money

By far, respondents' biggest concern with the Reading Academies law was the extra burden and stress it created based on factors such as perceived value, time commitment, and lack of compensation.

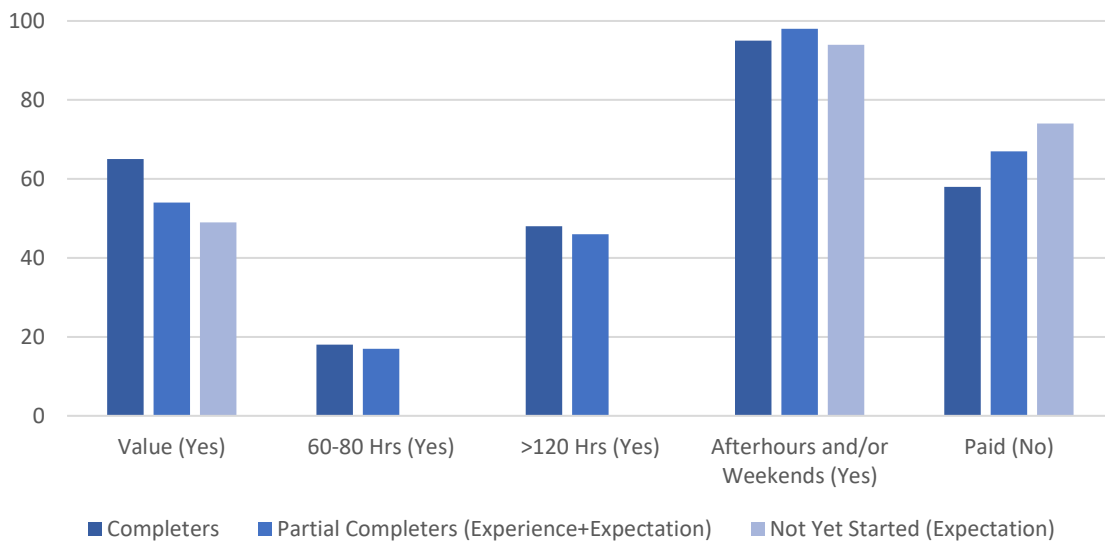
Sixty-five percent of those who completed the Reading Academies and 54% of partial completers found the content valuable. The value was hindered by the overwhelming content volume of the training, which made it hard to complete while teaching full-time (and during a pandemic), and the online format, which restricted collaboration. Respondents with a master's degree in similar content and veteran teachers found the training repetitive and shared that it did not add to their practice but rather that it was a lengthy review that reinforced good practice.

The time required to complete the training stressed respondents, particularly as it interfered with their teaching, planning, and personal family time. Of those who had completed the training, 48% reported that it took more than 120 hours to complete, double the TEA-suggested 60 hours. In fact, only 18% of completers reported that the training took between 60–80 hours to complete. Similarly, 46% of partial completers expected the training to take them over 120 hours to complete, and only 17% expected the training to take between 60–80 hours. Ninety-five percent of completers said they had worked after hours or weekends to finish the training, and 98% of partial completers had to work on the training outside of the school day or expected to do so in the future.

As for compensation, 58% of completers said they were not paid for their time, and, of those who were paid, stipends ranged from \$200 to \$7,600. Others said they were allowed substitutes for a given number of school days. Sixty-seven percent of partial completers were not being paid for their time, and those who were paid experienced a similar range to those who had already completed the training.

Of those who had not yet started the training, 49% expected it to be valuable (comments indicated this perception was based on feedback from colleagues), 94% expected to work after hours or weekends to complete the requirement, and 74% did not expect to be paid.

Respondents' Experiences with Value, Time, and Money of Reading Academies (Percentages)



District-Expected Completion Date

Respondents who had partially finished or had not started the training typically reported that their school district expected them to complete the Reading Academies requirement by Spring/Summer 2022, while those who had not yet started reported a district-expected completion by Spring/Summer 2023. Some have reported that they are required to adhere to their district’s expected completion date regardless of unique circumstances such as maternity leave.

Specials

Some respondents shared that their district was requiring them to attend a Reading Academy because they did not hold an “all-level” certification in art, health education, music, physical education, speech communication and theatre arts, or theatre, even though they were not directly involved in any reading or literacy instruction with their students. Our survey indicates that only 11 of our 975 K-3 educator respondents held an all-level certification in a specials subject. Unfortunately, this suggests that many “specials” teachers are being asked to spend valuable teaching and planning time completing the Reading Academies with likely little effect on student reading outcomes as they are teachers who do not focus on teaching reading or literacy concepts.

STR

As expected, only 85 respondents had taken the STR exam as that requirement has only been in effect since January 2021. Of those who took the STR exam and completed the Reading Academies training, 51% reported that the Reading Academies content was the same as what they had already mastered, and 40% reported that the Reading Academies content was more rigorous and/or in-depth. Results were similar for those who partially completed the Reading Academies.

Turning Feedback into Action

ATPE's survey is a valuable tool that sheds light on how educators are experiencing the Reading Academies requirement. Although many respondents shared that they found the content of the training very valuable and helpful, the volume and expectations of the training overshadowed its usefulness and created immense stress that has undoubtedly had a negative impact on students. Based on the feedback from our members, ATPE offers the following policy recommendations:

- **Timing.** The 120-plus hours required to complete the Reading Academies (equivalent to at least three full-time, five-day work weeks) experienced by many respondents, combined with the widespread lack of compensation and questioning of the training's value, is disappointing to many educators. These experiences are worsened by the pandemic. Given the results showing district-expected completion by Spring/Summer 2022, educators should be allowed the full statutory timeline through the 2022-23 school year to satisfy the Reading Academies requirement. This can include summertime, when respondents say they can focus more on reaping the benefits of the training without having to worry about classroom responsibilities. Additionally, educators who must temporarily leave the classroom due to circumstances such as childbirth should be allowed to stop and start the training from where they left off.
- **Compensation.** It is important to understand how certain districts are paying educators to complete the Reading Academies, and why others are not doing so similarly. Greater clarity is needed to ensure that as many educators as possible are paid for their time, whether by additional state funding or grants and/or by guidance and best practices shared by TEA with employing school districts or charter schools.
- **Value.** Respondents shared that a differentiation structure is needed to ensure that the Reading Academies are a good use of time for all

educators required to participate, both new and veteran. Prior content knowledge should determine the depth and extent of Reading Academies training an educator must take. Respondents suggested a “test-out” option for each objective within the Reading Academy or a condensed version of the training for those with prior mastery. One respondent also suggested that educators should earn a microcredential or indicator on their certificate for completing the training to show its value.

- **Specials.** To avoid unnecessary use of resources, it is important to clarify who is included in HB 3’s reference to classroom teachers, which under Texas Education Code 5.001(2) means “an educator who is employed by a school district and who, not less than an average of four hours each day, teaches in an academic instructional setting or a career and technology instructional setting” and “does not include a teacher's aide or a full-time administrator.” Any educator who teaches specials but does not hold an all-level certification in a specials subject should be exempt from the Reading Academy requirements, particularly because “all-level” certifications have only been in existence since 2008. This means a 15-year specials teacher may have to attend a Reading Academy simply because an all-level certification was not available at the time of their certification.

Conclusion

ATPE is committed to being the ally and voice for Texas educators and was privileged to receive such a robust response to our Reading Academy survey. We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to share these results and recommendations with Texas leaders, legislators, and agency staff. For additional information, contact ATPE Governmental Relations at government@atpe.org or (512) 467-0071.