



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

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Key Findings

- In focus groups, Senior Reading Advisors (SRAs) and principals reported impressive growth in the literacy skills of the SRAs' students so far this year.
- Analysis of average student performance in the Reading Horizons *Elevate* (RHE) software shows that students' reading skills are improving along several measures.
- SRAs and principals have mostly positive feelings about the SRA position and the RHE program; however, they offered some suggestions for improvement.
- A lack of resources, including computers, workbooks, and library books, has made the work of the SRAs more difficult than necessary. Some technological challenges have hampered their work as well.
- Mixed messages from the District regarding expectations for the SRAs created some confusion in the first year of implementation. This can be remedied for Year Two by creating clear, written guidelines that are distributed to all SRAs and their principals.

Senior Reading Advisors (SRAs)

The position of Senior Reading Advisor (SRA) was newly created not long before the beginning of this school year (2018–19). It was designed to be a highly skilled instructional position focused on addressing foundational literacy deficits in middle- and high-school students. Fifteen middle schools and 15 high schools received one SRA position each. Most, if not all, of the SRAs hired have extensive classroom instructional experience as well as administrative and/or instructional coaching experience. The Senior Reading Advisor is a 12-month position at Level 15 on the Shelby County Schools (SCS) classified salary scale; it thus pays more than other teaching positions (and more than some school-based administrative positions).

This report serves as an interim look at the implementation and preliminary effectiveness of the SRA position three-quarters into the first year of its creation. While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions about the position's impact on literacy and achievement at each school, an overview of student performance thus far in the program can signal potential efficacy. In addition, an examination of Year One implementation—including conditions that appear to be facilitating or hindering success—is essential to maximizing the effectiveness of the SRA position moving forward. To that end, the evaluator conducted focus groups with SRAs and principals to get a sense of implementation across schools and to elicit suggestions for improving the position for next year.

Reading Horizons *Elevate* (RHE)

SRA classes employ the Reading Horizons *Elevate* (RHE) instructional model, which includes adaptive software, workbooks, and reading materials. RHE instruction is highly scripted, and the RHE instructional model consists of the following rotation within each class period:

1. review – whole class
2. explicit teacher-directed instruction – whole class
3. guided practice (dictation)
4. independent work in stations (software, work with words, etc.)
5. lesson closeout – whole class (SCS additional component)



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

The focus of Reading Horizons *Elevate* is foundational literacy, but its presentation of content is designed for older students (grades 4–12). According to several SCS literacy leaders, foundational literacy programs are abundant, but those designed specifically for older students are scarce. Many early literacy programs present their content with cartoons and infantile voices, which can be off-putting and embarrassing for older students learning to read.

Here is a promotional synopsis of the program’s instructional approach, from the Reading Horizons website:

By teaching the core framework of the Reading Horizons method—the 42 Sounds of the Alphabet, 5 Phonetic Skills, and 2 Decoding Skills—students are empowered with skills that allow them to prove they are reading, spelling, and pronouncing the majority of the words in the English language with accuracy. Because each skill is introduced using multi-sensory teaching techniques, students are able to make new connections in their brain that help them quickly grasp each concept—keeping them engaged and motivated throughout the process.

The adaptive software component serves several functions within the RHE program, including diagnostic testing/placement, instructional delivery, progress monitoring of recently taught skills, and assessment of overall progress in the course. The next section offers an overview of student performance in the RHE software as of late February.

Student Performance

The RHE software tracks student progress with a variety of measures. Three of the best measures of students’ overall performance in the program are: average chapter test score, diagnostic gain, and library gain.

Each chapter test is designed to measure a student’s mastery of the skills covered in the current chapter. According to the vendor, 80–85% mastery indicates good understanding of the material. The SCS mean of students’ average chapter test scores is currently **90%**, a very healthy indicator of students’ comprehension of the course material.

Diagnostic gain is the difference between students’ pre-test score for the most recent set of skills and their latest progress-monitoring score for those skills. SCS students currently have an average diagnostic gain of **16** percentage points, indicating growth in their literacy skills.

Library gain is the difference between the first lexile measure, taken at the beginning of the course, and the current library lexile level. The current SCS mean library gain is **99 lexiles**, indicating that students are increasing their reading level, on average.

Feedback from Senior Reading Advisors

The evaluator conducted one focus group with nine Senior Reading Advisors: six who teach middle-schoolers and three who teach high-schoolers. The SRAs discussed a variety of topics; the primary themes emerging from the discussion are presented below.

Class Sizes / Number of Students Served

Most of the SRAs have fairly small class sizes, although one SRA teaches everyone in the school (with a coteacher) and thus has quite large classes. Here are the class sizes the SRAs reported:



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

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- 5 and 10
- 8 and 10
- 7 to 10 per class
- 5, 8, 10, and 10
- about 10 to 12 per class
- 12 per class
- 15 per class
- about 15 per class
- 33 to 35 per class

Most of the SRAs said they started with more students at the beginning of the year, but lost some students over the course of the school year. Some students transferred to another school, while others were suspended, expelled, or remanded to an alternative school because they exhibited behavior problems elsewhere in the building.

Some of the SRAs teach four or five classes, while some teach only two, leading to large differences in the overall number of students directly served by each SRA. Most of this variability appears to stem from school size and principals' and SRAs' understanding of the type of students the program was supposed to target. Most of the SRAs reported that they understood that their courses should consist of only sixth-graders (if at a middle school) or only ninth-graders (if at a high school) and that special-education (SPED) students were not to be included. (The SRA who teaches everyone, however, said her principal believes that SPED students should be included, so she teaches them alongside non-SPED students.)

In larger schools, restricting the roster to non-SPED students in one grade level who score low enough on reading diagnostics to be good candidates for a foundational literacy course yields enough students to fill up four to five classes (with students to spare). In small schools, however, there simply are not many students who meet all those criteria. For instance, one SRA said there are only 60 sixth-graders at her school, some of whom are SPED students and some of whom read too well to get much out of a beginning reading course—so she teaches just two small classes. She sees the need for the course among some seventh- and eighth-graders at her school and suggested that opening the course to other grade levels would help her position make a bigger impact on illiteracy at her school. Other SRAs at small schools echoed this sentiment, while those at larger schools said they thought the policy should remain as it is for their schools.

All the SRAs with small class sizes (in other words, all but one of the SRAs) said that the small class size is necessary for them to be maximally effective with their students. Their students need a lot of one-on-one attention, and the nature of the RHE instructional method would be very difficult to deliver with larger classes. Many of the SRAs also said they have experienced a much higher-than-average number of behavior problems this year, as compared to their previous teaching situations. They have a higher concentration of students who act out, and many said they are exhausted at the end of the day, even though they may have fewer than 10 students per class. These SRAs are seasoned teachers and administrators, yet they said they find the behavior aspect of their current position quite challenging.



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

Student Selection

Many of the SRAs expressed a desire to have a better process for selecting the right students for the program. One of the primary issues raised was the need to get data on incoming students, since most of the schools receive their targeted grade level (sixth or ninth) from feeder schools. Some said that getting data on students coming from charter or Achievement School District (ASD) schools (and especially the latter) was difficult if not impossible.

One SRA said her school gets a lot of students from charter schools, with long lags for getting their accompanying data. She thus conducted an informal screening process for those students, as well as for any students about whose NWEA MAP data she had misgivings. Most of the SRAs said they chose their students based on all three MAP administrations from the previous school year (for the students who had such data). Some seemed to find this method satisfactory, while others did not feel the MAP data gave them a good enough picture of the students' actual reading capabilities.

Because of the lack of data on many incoming students and the shortcomings some perceived in the MAP data, one SRA suggested that teachers at feeder schools could complete a short survey at the end of the year, listing the students they think would benefit from a foundational literacy course. Several others agreed with this suggestion.

The issue of mid-year transfers arose as another area to address. Because a number of students change schools during the year, some SRAs expressed the need to enable students to transfer into the course in their new school, rather than losing out on that type of instruction for the rest of the year. However, one SRA said she received a transfer student mid-year who had done most of the RHE lessons at her previous school out of sequence. Thus, integrating her into the class posed a challenge. This SRA, echoed by others, said that coordinating the pacing of the instruction across schools would be an important aspect to consider when planning to integrate incoming transfer students.

The SRAs said that most schools have their SRA-taught courses set up to be year-long, but a few are structured to allow students to move in and out of the course during the year. Some said whether or not to allow this practice should be established up front for all schools and communicated clearly.

Reading Horizons Elevate

The SRAs reported positive feelings overall about the RHE program and said that they have seen tremendous growth in many of their students' reading skills. Some mentioned that they have witnessed particular growth among their English Learner (EL) students. A few reported some resistance from students at the beginning of the year because of the program's very basic content (letter sounds, sounding out words, etc.), but most said their students warmed to the program as they progressed through the curriculum and were able to understand the mechanics of reading in a way that had previously eluded them.

Most complaints came from students whose reading level was arguably too advanced for the program from the outset. Here again, the need to select the proper students for the course was discussed. That said, some SRAs reported that even their more advanced readers were able to derive some benefit from having a better understanding of reading fundamentals. Both more advanced and more basic readers told their SRAs that the phonetic skills they were learning in RHE were benefitting them in other classes, such as English, history, and even science.

One complaint that nearly all the SRAs raised was the fact that the software does not restrict students' library selections to texts within their lexile range. Many students select texts well below



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

their reading level so that they will have easier work and higher scores; preventing this requires steady monitoring from the SRAs. One SRA avoids this by preselecting students' texts based on their lexile level and printing out the reading material ahead of time. However, this method is somewhat time-consuming and restricts students' freedom to choose their own texts. The consensus of the group was that it would make their job much easier if the software were set up to automatically offer a variety of texts that were in the students' target lexile range.

While the SRAs felt that the RHE software is user-friendly, they reported problems using it because of a couple of factors external to the program itself. One very big problem was that many SRAs did not have enough computers—or any at all, in some cases. Online instruction and assessment is an integral part of the program, but the SRAs were not allocated computers. They said they have had to scrounge around the school for equipment, which has been a serious hindrance.

Beyond this hurdle, the RHE software does not work well with Mozilla Firefox, which is the District-supported browser. RHE is designed to work best with Google Chrome, which the District does not support, so the SRAs have to download Chrome on an ongoing basis just so that the RHE software will work. They said it would be a tremendous help if the District could push out Chrome to their computers, the same way that it does for Firefox.

A number of the SRAs said that they get frequent error messages, such as *low resources*, *low disk space*, and *not secure*. They do not know if the source of the errors stems from the software itself, from the SCS computers/network, or from a misalignment between the two. Whatever the source, students in the SRAs' classes would benefit if those technological obstacles could be removed.

Beyond the problem of not having computers, the SRAs said that they were also not given any other resources necessary for their role, such as workbooks and library books that are integral to the RHE program. One teacher said she has to find each workbook online, “snip” it, put it into Microsoft Word, and make copies—all of which creates a lot of extra work. The SRAs argued that the investment in their position would be more impactful if a budget for necessary equipment and materials were included with the position.

As for the support the SRAs receive from the vendor (Reading Horizons), everyone seemed to feel that it was adequate and helpful.

Teacher Evaluations

Teacher evaluations emerged as a topic of concern and confusion. Several SRAs expressed dissatisfaction with being evaluated with an observation rubric that does not square with the instructional method required by the RHE curriculum. They said that the RHE checklist should be used instead, or at the very least, the Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM) observation rubric should be adapted to accommodate the particulars of RHE instruction. Some suggested that a crosswalk of some sort be developed to bridge the two rubrics.

There was also some confusion about whether the SCS non-instructional evaluation (NIE) applied to the SRA position—either instead of, or in addition to, the TEM. Some said they thought they were to be evaluated with both, others said with the NIE only, and others said with the TEM only. Some expressed that the NIE made more sense for their position in many ways, since it is a 12-month position that carries, at least for many, a number of responsibilities beyond direct instruction to students.



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

Regardless of their perspective on which evaluation would or should be used, there seemed to be consensus that the policy should be uniform across schools and that it should be planned over the summer and communicated clearly to principals from District higher-ups, with well-defined, written guidelines.

Leveraging the SRA Position for Maximum Impact

Only one of the SRAs reported having nothing but teaching and Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) duties; the rest said that they do instructional coaching, teacher observations, classroom walkthroughs, and/or administrative tasks in addition to their teaching and ILT roles. When asked how the SRA position could be leveraged to maximally reduce illiteracy in their school, all the SRAs said that a mix of teaching and other activities (especially instructional coaching) would help them make the most impact. Some said the exact mix and ratio of these duties, however, might be best determined by the needs of each school rather than through a uniform policy.

Several SRAs noted that they were able to reach more students by teaching their colleagues some of the phonetic tools used in the RHE program. They also said their techniques can be especially beneficial when they “push in” to other classes. As one SRA put it, history teachers (for example) may have their students read aloud, but they usually do not make their students go back and pronounce things properly when they mispronounce or struggle through words. “They don’t address the fluency issues,” she said, and the others agreed.

Several SRAs said they were concerned about students regressing after transitioning out of the program. They thought some sort of extension should be lined up for next year so that the progress their students have made this year does not stagnate or wither. One SRA suggested that students should take Etymology after this course, and others seconded her suggestion. Another SRA suggested that since each school has unlimited licenses for the RHE software, the SRAs could train reading teachers, English SPED teachers, and other select faculty in the RHE method, which would keep the current RHE students from losing ground, as well as extend the RHE tools to other students with foundational reading deficits. One SRA noted that the unlimited RHE software license could also be put to use for diagnostic screening of the student body.

Feedback from Principals

The evaluator conducted one focus group with seven principals: five who are at middle schools and two who are at high schools. Overall, the principals’ feedback was strikingly similar to that of the SRAs. Given this similarity, the principals’ focus group will not be discussed in as much depth as the SRAs’.

Class Sizes / Number of Students Served

The principals reported the following number of students served by the SRA at their school:

- 19 ninth-graders
- less than 20 ninth-graders
- 44 sixth-graders: four periods, with 10–12 students per class
- less than 45 sixth-graders
- 45 sixth-graders
- 74 sixth-graders



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

The principals' discussion of student selection echoed a lot of the points brought up by the SRAs. Notably, principals of larger schools said they wanted to keep selection to one grade level, while those in smaller schools would like the ability to expand the program to other grade levels once they exhausted the supply of eligible sixth- or ninth-graders. However, even those who want the option of expanding to other grade levels said the expansion should not come at the expense of larger class sizes. They said that the one-on-one aspect of the course must be preserved if it is to keep achieving its current level of effectiveness.

As with the SRAs, a few of the principals brought up their concern that students might regress after they leave the program. They said they would like to extend the program to the next grade level next year; after the second year, the students should be on solid enough footing not to need it anymore. One principal said he would like to add a reading teacher (that the District would pay for) to help the current students next year.

Student Selection

The principals discussed many of the same issues around selecting students for the program as the SRAs had mentioned. Some principals with ASD feeder schools said it was very difficult to get data on students coming from those schools, although one principal said she could get what she needed from her ASD feeder school. All the principals agreed that identifying the appropriate students for the program as early as possible was important, but they had different ideas about how best to do that for their particular situations.

One principal said his SRA administered a two-stage entrance test (fluency and comprehension) for incoming sixth-graders, since so many of his students come from charter and ASD schools. Some other principals expressed interest in this approach, but one principal said that students already take enough diagnostics at the beginning of the year and that she would like to avoid having to administer yet another one.

Reading Horizons Elevate

The principals seemed to have a favorable impression of the RHE program, and many said that the students in the program have demonstrated exceptional growth so far. They also echoed the SRAs' complaints about not having a budget, equipment, and materials to go along with the SRA position.

Teacher Evaluations

The principals expressed the same confusion as the SRAs about which type of evaluation to use for the SRAs: the NIE, the TEM, or both. They also brought up the mismatch between the TEM observation rubric and the script that the SRA is supposed to follow to implement the RHE program with fidelity. One principal suggested that the SRA evaluation contain an addendum, as is the case for SPED and instructional-resource teachers. Another principal brought up the issue of how many observations were required for his SRA: she had needed only two in her previous teaching role, but now was required to have four, which made little sense to him.

Leveraging the SRA Position for Maximum Impact

It was clear throughout the discussion that the principals had different impressions of the District's expectations of the SRA position. For example, some thought SPED students were not to be included in the SRAs' classes, while others said they did not have that understanding. Some thought RTI² reading students were not to be included, while others thought they could be. Some mentioned that not knowing whether the SRAs would be funded next year was a source of stress and uncertainty



Senior Reading Advisors 2018–19 Interim Evaluation Report

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

that made the SRA job more tenuous, while others said they thought the SRA position had three years of guaranteed funding. Some had received the message that the SRA was not to have administrative responsibilities, while others thought that the ability to give their SRA administrative duties was supposed to be a major selling point for the position.

Given these disparate understandings, the principals agreed, as did the SRAs, that the District should decide exactly how the SRA position should be deployed, and then it should communicate those expectations clearly, thoroughly, and in writing. However, while the SRAs tended to advocate for more uniformity in their positions across schools, a slightly different consensus emerged on this point among the principals. The principals agreed that they would like to have in writing the non-negotiable aspects of the SRA position, but they said that it was important for them to have the autonomy to use the SRA position as they saw fit, outside of the non-negotiables.

Conclusion

Overall, SRAs and principals are pleased with the RHE program and the growth that they have seen in their students' reading facility over the course of the school year. They understand that the SRA plan was rolled out rather quickly and that that has been the root cause of the mixed messaging they have received about the District's expectations for the SRA position. They very much appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback to help improve the position for next year. It is now up to District leaders to decide which aspects of the SRA position are musts and which are flexible. As long as the expectations are communicated clearly and in writing before the beginning of next school year, Year Two holds great promise for a smooth implementation of the SRA position and the RHE program.