Draft Recommendation: English Language Arts Advisory Committee
Feb 2026

Recommendation: Expand support for reading specialists in schools, especially Title 1 schools, to bring equity to the role following implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act.

Alignment to Strategic Plan

Priority: Student Academic Growth and Success | Student Centered Workforce

Performance Objective: Growth in Reading & Math | Employee Retention; Workplace Climates

Strategies

Student Academic Growth and Success

- Implement science of reading strategies and curriculum resources to grow all readers, particularly those below proficiency.
- Provide professional learning and coaching support to teachers and instructional assistants to improve the performance of all students based on needs to include a deliberate focus on historically marginalized student groups.
- Provide structures that strengthen collaboration, shared belief in ability to achieve intended results, and scaling of best practices across all schools and the division.
- Personalize reading and math instruction to meet the diverse needs of all learners (including time, opportunity, course choice) to annually improve skills and content knowledge.
- Provide intensified and extended learning opportunities that enable students to develop knowledge and skills that align with learning needs, personal interests and cultural relevance.

Student Centered Workplace

- Establish a comprehensive recruitment plan to recruit substitutes, internal employees and prospective high school students to all APS Grow Your Own programs.
- Develop and implement reward and recognition processes for all employees aligned to APS strategic priorities and performance objectives.

Summary

Our recommendation is for APS to employ strategies to better support reading specialists tasked with the implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act. This move will strengthen academic growth and success, providing improved employee retention in a student centered workforce. Currently, APS reading specialists are not incentivized to become or remain reading specialists.

The Virginia Literacy Act seeks to uplift the literacy of every student; requiring individualized reading plans for each student who needs a reading intervention based on performance data indicating high risk in reading. While this is essential for a student's academic growth and success in reading, it also creates a higher workload for reading specialists. This workload is dispersed inequitably as students needing reading plans are disproportionately represented in Title 1 schools and other high needs schools, placing a deeper burden on these faculty members in comparison to their counterparts in other schools.

The emerging issue surrounds equity and employee retention. Credentialed reading specialists are challenging to retain in high need schools, and change is needed to support these employees.

Creating and updating student reading plans requires reading specialists to: assess students with the VALLSS (Virginia Literacy and Language Screening System); analyze the data for each student

for instructional indicators; determine the goals and objectives; create, schedule, and implement intervention; select and evaluate a progress monitoring tool; solicit parent input; and schedule the student in a small group time. During the week, plan maintenance entails: track attendance, participation, and monitor progress.

According to our fall 2025 reading specialist survey, 66.7% of reading specialists needed to create between 1-25 reading plans, with an estimated workload of between 1-8 hours. This is reasonable. In contrast, ~33% of reading specialists created between 26-199 reading plans, with 9.5% writing between 100-199 plans. The time difference is great. These educators reported "more than 10 hours" to write these plans, although precise numbers are not known. This alone showcases the disparities among the same position throughout APS.

Potential Strategies for Change:

- Dedicated planning time for reading specials to write on student reading plans.
- Strategic use of reading specialist time and duties as assigned by principal.
- Coordinate with principals to find ways to spread the task of developing reading plans among more faculty.
- Reduce scheduling challenges and staffing issues to facilitate higher focus on reading plans.
- Increase compensation by two to three pay steps for Reading Specialists assigned to elementary schools with 100 or more Student Reading Plans (SRPs) or middle schools with 150 Student Reading Plans.
- "Grow your own" reading specialists by Providing substitute-covered release days for recommended teachers to complete the Virginia **Reading Specialist Microcredential**.

This recommendation may be in alignment with Governor Spanberger's "High-Quality Public Education Directive" executive order.

Budgetary Implications

This recommendation is budget neutral with the exception of the financial incentives suggested for reading specialists. Our staff liaison has consulted with APS Human Resources. HR is supportive of this incentive to increase retention in these hard to fill roles.

Advisory Committee Members
Jamie Gillan Deich, Chair
Carolyn Sheedy, Secretary
Gail W. Perry, Member
Heather Martin, Member

Staff Liaison
Sarah Cruz, ELA Supervisor

Committee Vote: 3-0 **Date:** 1/21/2026

Detailed Explanation of Recommendation

The essential duties of a reading specialist include supporting students, teachers and administrators with literacy instruction and intervention in the school. This includes some of the following duties;

- Facilitate Collaborative Learning Teams of teachers on the use of curriculum, planning for instruction, and analyzing assessment data.

- Analyze school literacy data and plan for student literacy needs.
- Partner with the EL and SPED teachers at the school to determine literacy supports.
- Provide data analysis and oversight for the completion of all student reading plans as required by the VLA.
- Provide intervention for students based on literacy data and structured literacy practices.
- Assess students using a variety of literacy measures (screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring) to determine appropriate placement and specific instructional needs.
- Analyze data from assessments, monitor and adjust literacy interventions.
- Provide curriculum support and training for all ELA teachers.
- Serve as a liaison between the ELA office and the school site for division literacy initiatives.

This is a heavy workload and responsibility. When one of these items requires a disproportionate amount of time, especially in comparison with colleagues at other schools, it takes away time from other essential items, such as intervention instruction or supporting ELA teachers. Reading specialists already have an intense workload, those with additional tasks need more support.

The VDOE currently requires 1 reading specialist for every 550 students in elementary school and 1 reading specialist for every 1,000 middle school students. Qualified reading specialists are hard to find because becoming a reading specialist is not simple. State certificate programs require teachers to already have a master's degree and then enroll in a 21-credit program. VDOE requires that reading specialist license holders have 3 years of classroom experience. While these credentials are necessary, they are not simple to obtain and in the current environment, they lack incentive to motivate teachers to pursue them. One of the strategies we share advocates for supporting teachers who want to earn the micro-credential to become a reading specialist for 5 years, which is a faster path to increasing the number of reading specialists and reducing the workload for the current team. In addition, it gives the interested teachers an opportunity to try out the role before investing years of time into earning the permanent credential.

Once qualified, attracting and retaining reading specialists is even harder. Some of the top reading specialists leave for higher paying positions in nearby districts, and others look for positions in schools where the workload is more manageable. This issue is amplified by the new requirements of the VLA. The current number of APS students, K-8, who require Individualized Reading Plans is 3,673. According to our survey, 66% of reading specialists would be encouraged to stay in their current position with more compensation. 22% are interested in reduced workload. Alarmingly, 15, or 35.7% of reading specialists report not feeling positively supported by their schools. In concert, this data reveals a troubling outlook for retention of our current reading specialists. Our recommendation and implementation strategies strive to meet these needs.

This recommendation is not only centered on APS staff, it is also tied to student success and systematic literacy improvements. Unfortunately, this issue deeply and disproportionately impacts APS's economically disadvantaged students, students of color, students with disabilities, and Title 1 and high-needs schools. To illustrate this, system-wide, 72.4% of 3rd graders passed the reading SOL in AY 24-25, but only 49.3% of the economically disadvantaged students passed. Only 58.7% of black students and 46.9% of hispanic students were successful. Even while recognizing that some of these students are also EL students, it is still a dramatically different and unacceptable result. The data is more dismal when we look at specific schools where the scores dip into the 20th and 30th percentiles. And only 40.8% of our students with disabilities passed. (APS Dashboard). It is not a surprise that 31% of reading specialists view supporting Individualized Reading Plans as a primary part of their position. Our aim is to support student's literacy through freeing the reading specialists time and focus while incentivizing their work.

Detailed Explanation Potential Strategies for Change:

Finding strategies and solutions for changing this dynamic presents a unique challenge. Many reading specialists throughout the county find the individual reading plan workload manageable and also experience a high level of satisfaction in their position. As such, they are less likely to be interested in adding to their workload. At the same time, others in the district are experiencing an enormous uptick in workload and are not feeling supported in their positions. After much consideration, we endorse these strategies because they are most likely to lead to systemic buy-in by leadership and staff while striving to bring equity and simultaneously considering budget constraints.

- **Strategy** Dedicated planning time for reading specialists to write student reading plans.

  Explanation Reading specialists are not currently provided with planning time specifically dedicated to individualized reading plan creation and maintenance. Given the extensive nature of these plans, focused time for completion is warranted.

- **Strategy** Strategic use of reading specialist time and duties as assigned by principal.

  Explanation: Our survey reveals that one of the biggest barriers to workload completion is staffing issues. Reading specialists are often asked to fill those gaps by covering classes as substitutes. A system wide policy shift would encourage school leadership to identify other individuals to fill these gaps. Preventing these skilled specialists from covering classes would also signal a priority shift towards literacy.

- **Strategy**: Coordinate with principals to find ways to spread the task among more faculty.

  Explanation: One of the difficulties in finding solutions to this equity issue is that some of the potential solutions fail to take individual school needs into account, which is not possible with a single, inflexible policy or task. Empowering principals to work with their faculties and each other to create a success strategy will address context specific needs and facilitate buy-in.

- **Strategy**: View the creation and maintenance of reading plans holistically throughout the district. Create reading specialist teams assigned to reading plans across schools, similar to other support roles.

  Explanation: This model has been a success with other support roles, such as supporting students with IEP and 504 plans.

- **Strategy**: Reduce scheduling challenges and staffing issues to facilitate higher focus on the comprehensive literacy system of the school.

  Explanation: Scheduling challenges and staffing issues are the two largest issues in the way of reading specialists focusing on their responsibilities.

- **Strategy:** Increase compensation by two to three pay steps for Reading Specialists assigned to elementary schools with 100 or more Student Reading Plans (SRPs) or middle schools with 150 Student Reading Plans. Compensation could also be provided via stipend or via paid extra time.

Explanation: As showcased, recruiting and retaining qualified reading specialists is a serious challenge. In order to attract more talent and keep that talent from leaving APS or vacating their position, we recommend a financial incentive. At present, there are zero financial incentives for reading specialists. With inequitably increased workload, reading specialists will not stay. They will relocate or return to the traditional classroom to avoid higher workload without higher compensation.

- **Strategy**: "Grow your own" reading specialists by **Providing substitute-covered release days** for recommended teachers to complete the **Virginia Reading Specialist Microcredential**.

  Explanation: Given the dearth of qualified reading specialists, this strategy provides a way to produce more within our ranks.

We believe these strategies will encourage recruitment and retention among reading specialists while also increasing employee morale. Even more significant, bringing more equity to these positions will buoy literacy system-wide at APS, in particular with students of color, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged and Title 1 and high needs schools.

References

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Saroughi, M., Trzaska, K., & Cheema, J. R. (2025). The effect of teacher participation, teacher morale, and teacher shortage on U.S. school performance. *Issues in Educational Research, 35*(3), 1178-1196. https://montgomerycollege.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/effect-teacher-participation-morale-shortage-on-u/docview/3258939000/se-2

Staff Response

Appendices

Reading Specialist Support