

IOWA | Iowa Reading Research Center

IMPLEMENTATION FIDELITY PRACTICES

FOR K-12 READING INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION

A SURVEY OF IOWA SCHOOL PRACTITIONERS

Iowa Reading Research Center

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Rationale

In Iowa and across the United States, recent legislation has increased schools' focus on implementing evidence-based literacy instruction and adopting aligned instructional resources (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Schwartz, 2025). However, adopting evidence-based practices (EBPs) alone does not ensure improved student outcomes. To yield their intended benefits, EBPs must be implemented with fidelity (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019a). Accordingly, monitoring implementation fidelity is essential for understanding the extent to which EBPs are implemented as intended in school settings (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019a; Sanetti & Luh, 2019). Implementation fidelity is a multidimensional construct that encompasses: (a) adherence to core instructional components, (b) amount of time that instruction is delivered (dosage) and received by students (exposure), and (c) instructional quality (Sanetti et al., 2021). Implementation fidelity data provide information needed to determine whether student outcomes are likely attributable to instructional materials or to how they were implemented (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019a). If the degree to which instruction has been implemented as intended is uncertain, it can be difficult for educators to make informed instructional decisions and provide necessary supports for students (McKenna & Parenti, 2017).

Despite evidence highlighting the association between implementation of EBPs with fidelity and improved student outcomes in reading (Scott et al., 2019), monitoring and sustaining high fidelity can be challenging in school settings (Cochrane et al., 2019; Keller-Margulis, 2012). Ongoing fidelity monitoring requires: (a) investments of time, personnel, and training (Cochrane et al., 2019) and (b) a systematic protocol for collecting fidelity data (McKenna & Parenti, 2017; Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2019b). It also depends on cultivation of a positive and collaborative culture in which fidelity monitoring is perceived as a tool for improving instruction (McKenna & Parenti, 2017). Further, supporting teachers in balancing fidelity with the flexibility needed to meet students' individual needs (i.e., fit) is not always well defined in practice (Harn et al., 2013). As a result, teachers may experience tension between adherence and making instructional adaptations they believe are necessary to support individual learners if essential components of EBPs are not well-defined.

As schools across Iowa are seeking to align literacy instruction with EBPs, high-quality implementation must be supported. Thus, the purpose of this study is to describe implementation fidelity monitoring practices of Iowa school practitioners, including both K–12 teachers and personnel involved in fidelity monitoring, via a statewide survey to better understand current approaches and identify opportunities to provide supports.

Key Findings

- Approximately 57.0% of Iowa practitioners who completed the survey reported implementation is monitored externally at least sometimes.
    - Survey participants most often identified: (a) instructional coaches and principals as individuals responsible for monitoring implementation fidelity, (b) adherence to instructional components and student engagement as priorities during fidelity checks, and (c) direct observation as a method for monitoring fidelity.
    - On average, respondents affirmed use of 7.2 of the 13 fidelity monitoring practices (*SD* = 3.47) included on the Implementation Fidelity Practices Index. Across items, more

participants reported receiving training on implementing instructional resources with fidelity than those reporting that fidelity was monitored.

- Overall, respondents held generally positive perceptions of implementation fidelity monitoring, with about two-thirds endorsing its importance and instructional value. Responses were more mixed regarding school culture around fidelity monitoring and clarity of implementation expectations (e.g., defining essential components of EBPs).

Method

Sampling and Recruitment Procedures

We used a multidimensional strategy to recruit K–12 Iowa school practitioners responsible for providing reading instruction (e.g., teachers) or observing or monitoring implementation fidelity of reading instruction (e.g., principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, school psychologist, curriculum specialists; hereinafter "non-teachers"). Our primary recruitment strategy, direct contact of Iowa school personnel via email, yielded 99% of total responses. Using The Generalizer webtool (Tipton & Miller, 2026), we generated four lists of public schools in Iowa stratified across school-level demographic characteristics. Beginning at the top of each recruitment list, research assistants gathered email addresses for eligible teachers and non-teachers from publicly available data on school websites, where available. The remaining 1% of respondents were recruited via: (1) advertisements on social media, (2) the Iowa Reading Research Center's email newsletter, and (3) a mass email sent to faculty and staff at the University of Iowa.

Participants

Our sample includes a total of 186 responses from Iowa teachers (n = 144, 77.4%) and non-teachers (n = 42, 22.6%). Teacher respondents included general education teachers (n = 83, 44.6%), reading specialists, interventionists or Title 1 teachers (n = 32, 17.2%), special education teachers (n = 25, 13.4%), ELL/ESL teachers (n = 3, 1.6%), and teachers working across multiple areas (n = 1, 0.5%). Of the non-teachers, most respondents were instructional coaches (n = 29, 15.6%), followed by building administrators (n = 10, 5.4%) and learning or curriculum specialists (n = 3, 1.6%). Respondents worked across multiple grade bands, including early childhood (n = 21, 11.8%), elementary (n = 141, 79.2%), middle (n = 48, 27.0%), and high school (n = 24, 13.5%).

On average, teachers had 18.1 years of experience (SD = 9.0), and non-teachers had 9.3 years of experience working in leadership positions (SD = 7.6). All nine Area Education Agencies (AEAs) serving Iowa schools were represented by respondents (see Figure 1), and results of a generalizability analysis indicated high generalizability of the sample to the state of Iowa based on respondents' school-level demographics (GAI = 0.97; Tipton & Miller, 2026). Approximately 46.9% (n = 60) of respondents responsible for teaching or supporting core literacy instruction (n = 128) reported using one or more statewide High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM; see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents Across Area Education Agencies

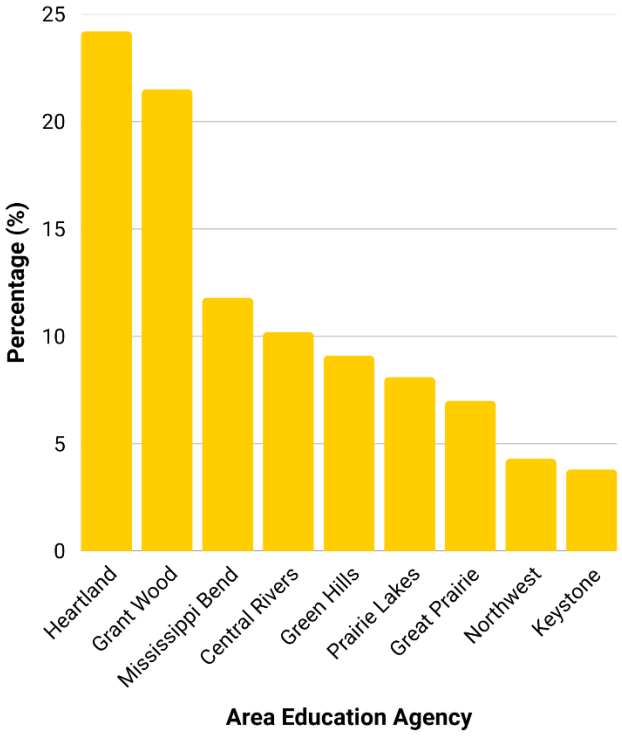
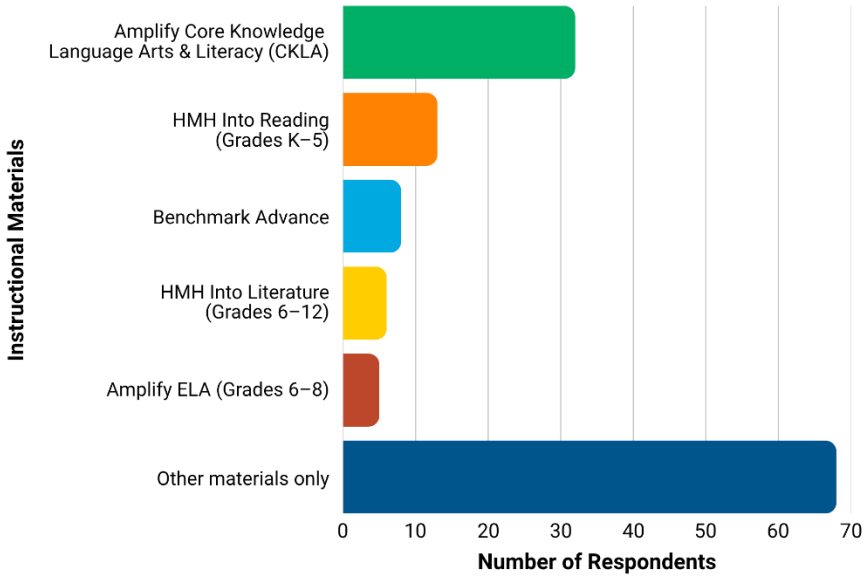


Figure 2. Overall Reported Use of Instructional Materials for Core Reading Instruction (*n* = 128)

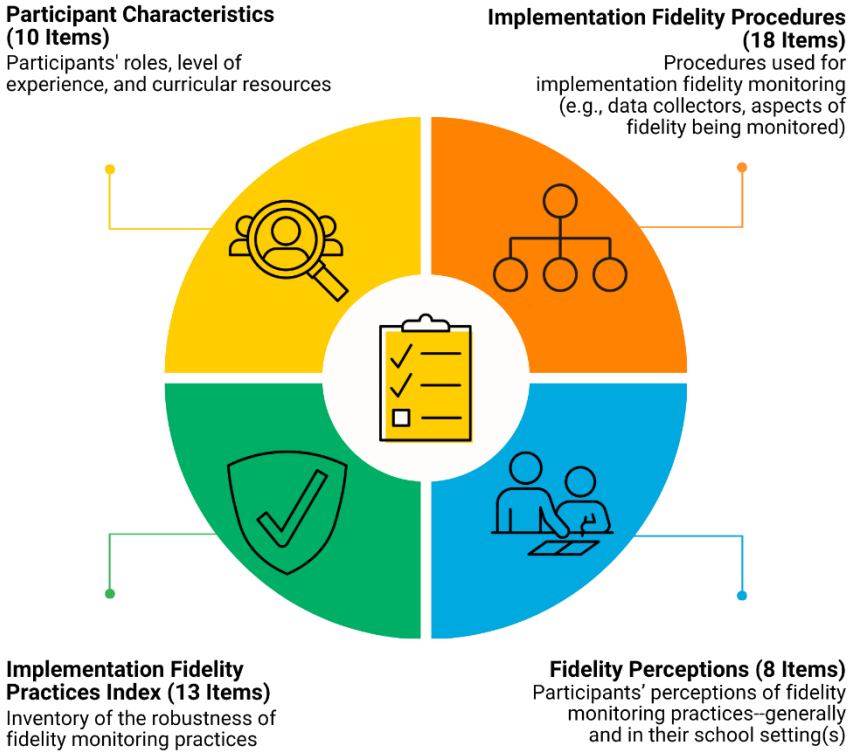


Note. Response options were not mutually exclusive, and some respondents (*n* = 4) indicated use of more than one HQIM.

Survey Development

We developed a survey of educators' implementation fidelity practices and perceptions for reading instruction and intervention based on a review of relevant literature (Burns et al., 2025; Cochrane et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2022; Keller-Margulis, 2012; McKenna & Parenti, 2017, Sanetti & DiGennaro Reed, 2012; Swindle et al., 2022). Following initial item development, the survey underwent multiple rounds of review, including: (a) feedback from expert reviewers, (b) review by members of an advisory board comprising school administrators and literacy experts, and (c) a survey pilot with a small number of eligible respondents. During the development and pilot testing phases, items were added, removed, and revised to promote clarity and consistent interpretation. The final survey included four sections: Participant Characteristics, Implementation Fidelity Procedures, Implementation Fidelity Practices Index, and Fidelity Perceptions. In Figure 3, a summary of survey sections is displayed. Item types included Likert-style, multiple choice, multiselect, and short answer (i.e., text box provided for participants' responses).

Figure 3. Overview of Survey Components



Data Analysis

We conducted descriptive analyses, including frequency counts for categorical items (e.g., number of times a survey respondent reported that an instructional coach was responsible for conducting observations) and calculation of means and standard deviations for continuous items (e.g., years of experience). For some items, respondents were able to select more than one response option. As such,

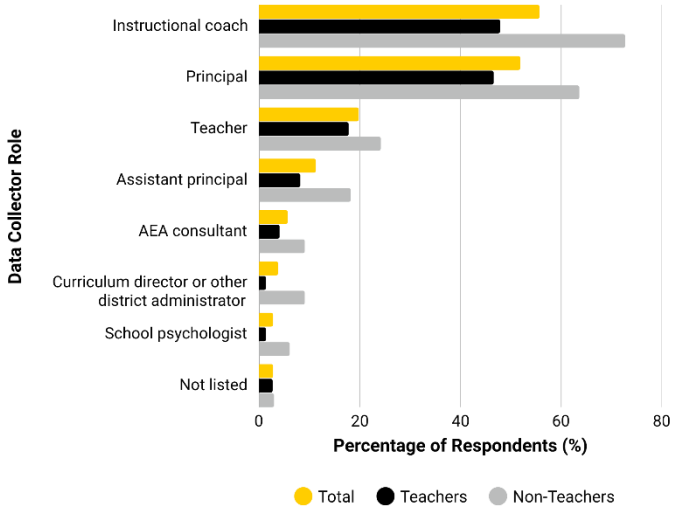
for some items, the total number of responses exceeds the total number of respondents. We used crosstabs analyses to disaggregate responses we received from teachers and non-teachers. For the Implementation Fidelity Monitoring Practices Index, we report the number of respondents who reported each practice was implemented in their school setting, an averaged summed score for the full sample of respondents, and average scores for the teacher and non-teacher subgroups.

Results

Implementation Fidelity Monitoring Procedures

Of the 186 respondents who completed the survey, 106 (57.0%) indicated that implementation fidelity of literacy instruction is monitored at their school to some extent. This subset of respondents answered a series of follow-up questions about fidelity monitoring procedures. Participants reported implementation fidelity monitoring occurred most often during core instruction (*n* = 69, 65.1%) and intervention (*n* = 65, 61.3%), but less often during intensive intervention (*n* = 36, 34%). Instructional coaches (*n* = 59, 55.7%) and principals (*n* = 55, 51.9%) were reported as data collectors most often. Fewer than 20% of respondents reported that teachers, assistant principals, AEA consultants, curriculum directors/district administrators, school psychologists, or other parties monitored implementation fidelity (see Figure 4 for proportions by role).

Figure 4. Implementation Fidelity Data Collector Role



Respondents indicated that implementing essential components as intended (*n* = 74, 69.8%), student engagement (*n* = 71, 67.0%), and total time spent teaching the program or practice per day or week (*n* = 56, 52.8%) were aspects of fidelity that were prioritized most often (see Figure 5 for all response options).

Figure 5. Aspects of Implementation Fidelity Prioritized in Schools

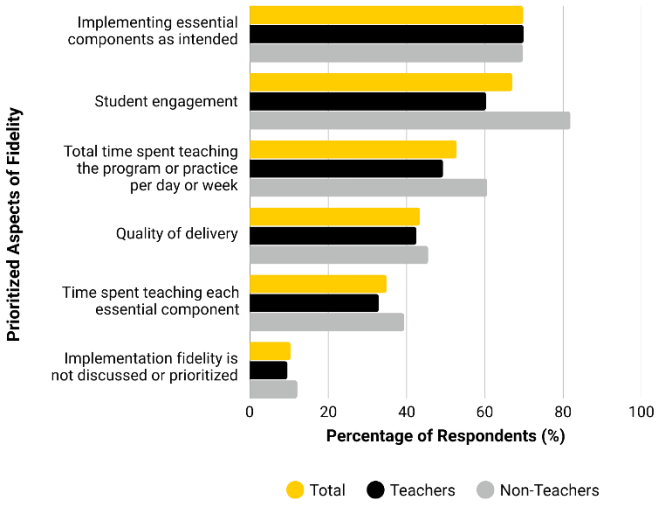
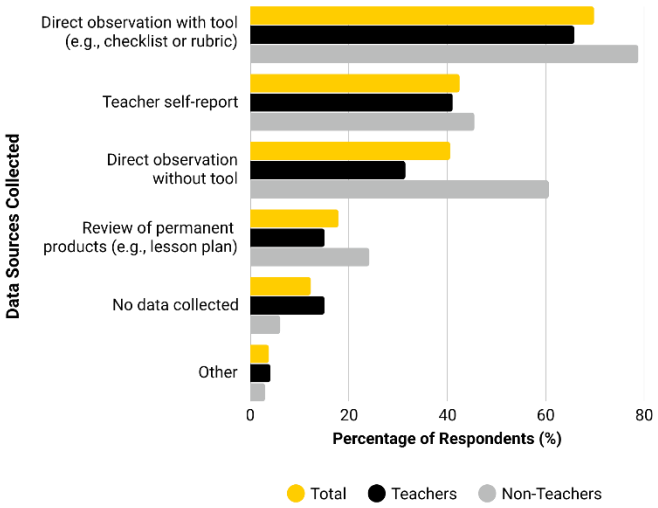


Figure 6. Data Sources Collected to Monitor Fidelity

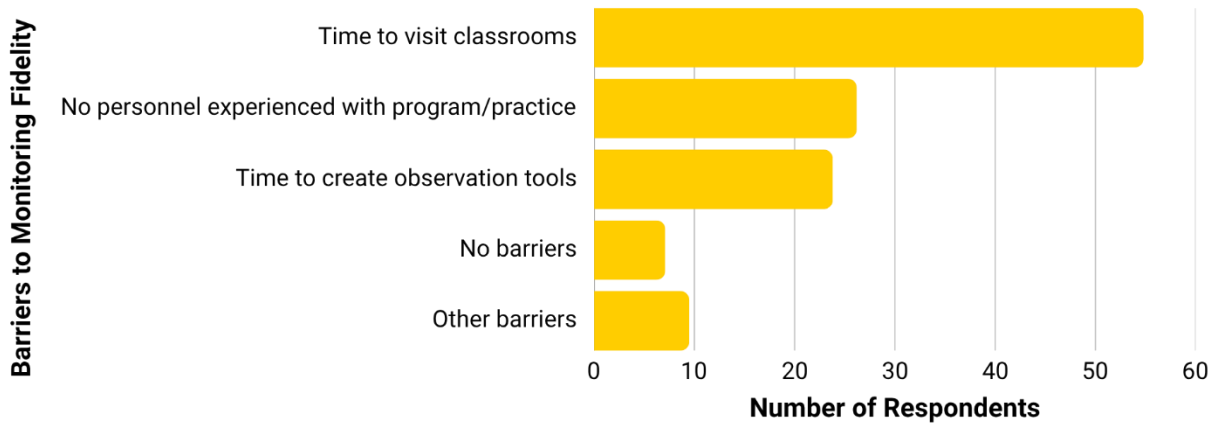


Direct observation with a tool (e.g., rubric or checklist; *n* = 74, 69.8%) was most often selected as a fidelity monitoring data source. Collection of any other data source was reported by fewer than 50% of respondents (see Figure 6 for all response options). Most respondents reported that fidelity checklists are developed by school or district personnel (*n* = 43, 40.6%), published for a specific program or practice (*n* = 35, 33.0%), or adapted from a published checklist (*n* = 25, 23.6%). Few indicated that unpublished checklists/rubrics are obtained from other districts or online sources (*n* = 2, 1.9%).

Respondents indicated that fidelity checks are announced (*n* = 64, 60.4%) more often than unannounced (*n* = 49, 46.2%) and are infrequently requested by a teacher (*n* = 19, 17.9%). Regarding procedures to follow-up after fidelity checks if fidelity is low, participants indicated that: (a) feedback is provided to the teacher (*n* = 59, 55.7%), (b) coaching, mentoring, or training is provided (*n* = 57, 53.8%), or (c) the teacher's fidelity is monitored more often (*n* = 32, 30.2%). A small proportion of participants reported that no steps are taken (*n* = 10, 9.4%), and about a quarter of respondents did not know how low fidelity is addressed (*n* = 27, 25.5%).

We asked only non-teachers about barriers to implementation fidelity monitoring. Time needed to visit classrooms to collect a representative sample (e.g., across grades, content areas) was the most common barrier (*n* = 23, 54.8%; see Figure 7 for all response options). When given the opportunity to cite other barriers (*n* = 4, 9.5%), non-teachers cited lack of follow through (*n* = 1), challenges with cultivating a positive culture around fidelity monitoring (*n* = 1), and a low priority on fidelity monitoring (*n* = 2) as barriers.

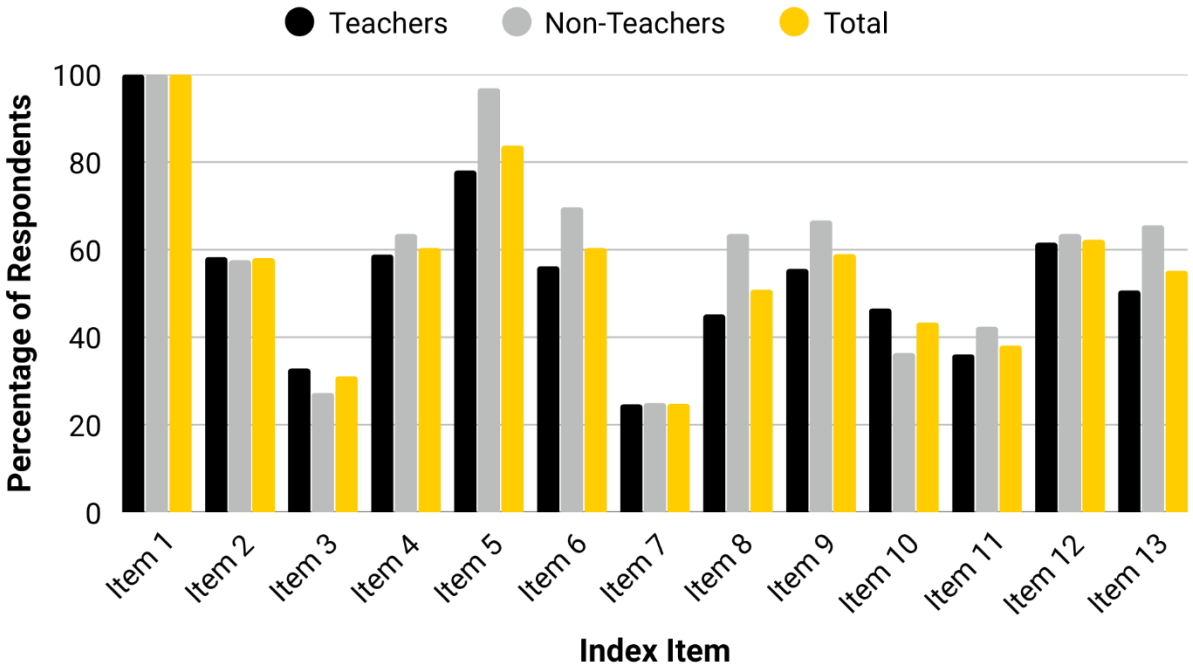
Figure 7. Percentage of Non-Teachers Reporting Each Item as a Barrier to Implementation Fidelity Monitoring



Implementation Fidelity Monitoring Practices Index

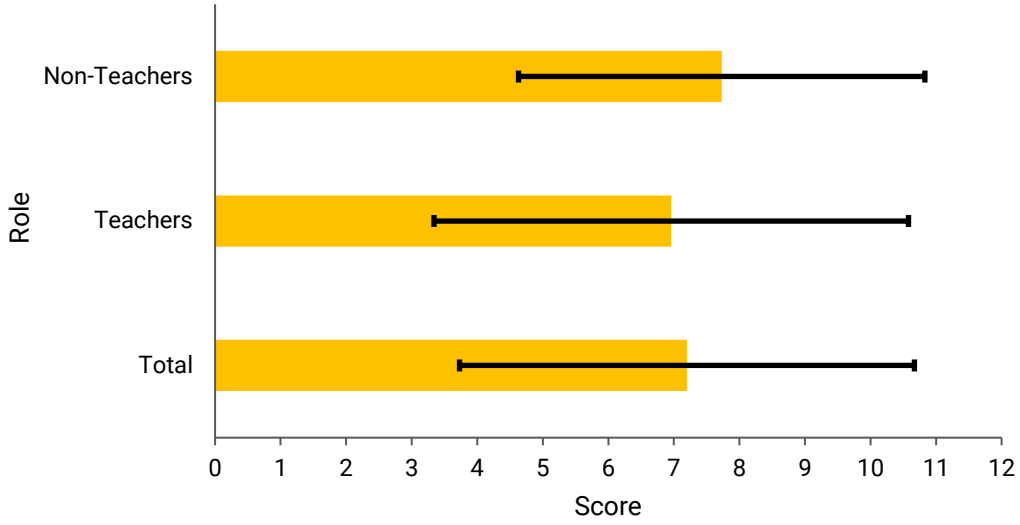
Results for each item included on the Implementation Fidelity Monitoring Practices Index are reported in Figure 8. Notably, all participants reported "yes" to receiving training on implementing instruction or intervention with fidelity, and more than 80% of respondents reported that they were provided coaching, professional development, or other resources to support implementation fidelity. Least often, respondents indicated that fidelity checks were conducted regularly or that teachers were involved in developing fidelity checklists or rubrics. In Figure 9, average summed scores, along with standard deviations, are displayed. Overall, respondents responded "yes" to 7.2 of the 13 items (*SD* = 3.5, range: 1–13). On average, non-teachers reported that a greater number of fidelity monitoring practices were used in their school settings (*M* = 7.7, *SD* = 3.1) than teachers (*M* = 7.0, *SD* = 3.6).

Figure 8. Percentage of Respondents Reporting "Yes" to Implementation Fidelity Monitoring Practices Items by Role



Item 1: Training is provided on implementing instruction or intervention with fidelity.
Item 2: Fidelity data are collected as part of regular practice.
Item 3: Fidelity data are collected on a clearly defined schedule or frequency.
Item 4: Teachers are informed of fidelity criteria before a fidelity check.
Item 5: Teachers are provided coaching, PD, or other resources to support implementation fidelity.
Item 6: Observers use a rubric or checklist to monitor teachers' delivery of a program or practice.
Item 7: Teachers are involved in developing fidelity rubrics or checklists.
Item 8: Teachers can view the fidelity rubric or checklist before an observation.
Item 9: Teachers receive or discuss feedback about implementation fidelity after a fidelity check.
Item 10: Teachers are provided with both quantitative and qualitative feedback after a fidelity check (e.g., ratings and specific examples).
Item 11: Observers track fidelity data over time.
Item 12: Fidelity data are considered when making instructional changes (e.g., student supports).
Item 13: The leadership team considers fidelity data when making system-level decisions (e.g., PD planning, resource allocation).

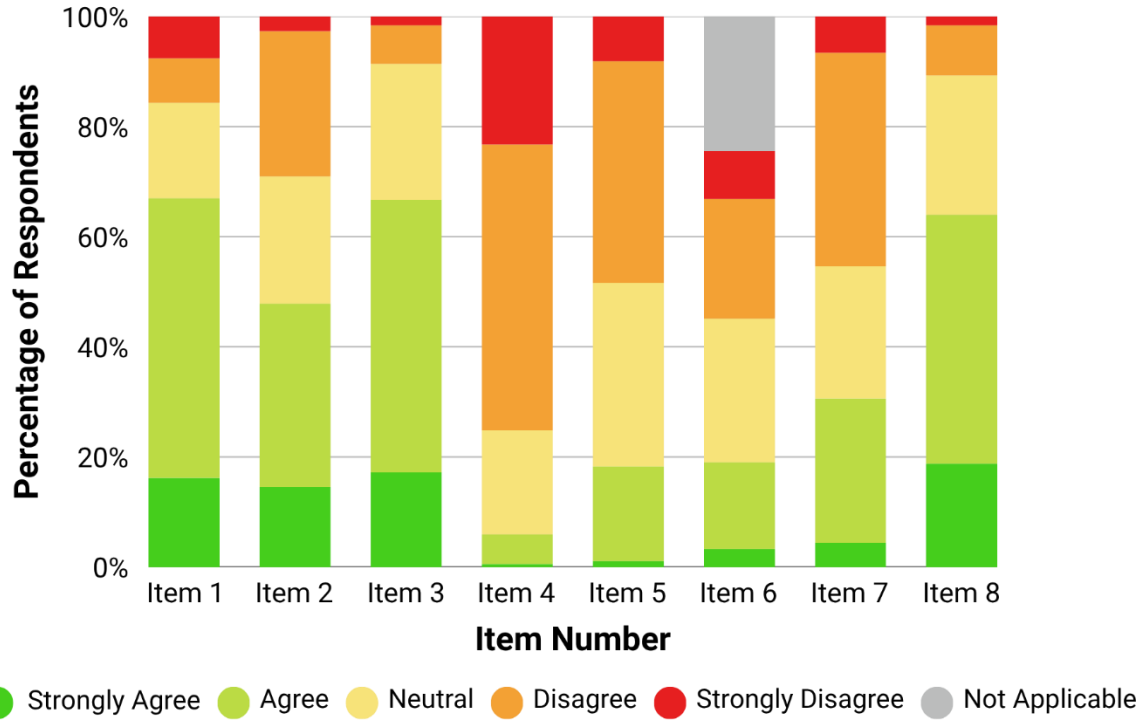
Figure 9. Average Total Score on Implementation Fidelity Monitoring Practices Index



Implementation Fidelity Monitoring Perceptions

In the final survey section, we asked respondents about their perceptions of implementation fidelity monitoring (see Figure 10). Some items were worded positively (e.g., fidelity monitoring is a tool to improve student learning) and others were worded negatively (e.g., fidelity monitoring is not necessary). Overall, respondents' perceptions of implementation fidelity monitoring were more positive than negative, with approximately two-thirds of respondents indicating positive perceptions of implementation fidelity on Item 1 (fidelity is important), Item 3 (fidelity is a tool to improve student learning), and Item 8 (fidelity monitoring is essential for improving instruction). In contrast, Items 5 and 6, which pertained to school culture around fidelity monitoring, suggested more variation in respondents' experiences. Additionally, more than 50% of respondents were neutral, agreed, or strongly agreed that adherence to a program or practice restricts teachers' flexibility to meet individual students' needs. Meanwhile, more than 50% of respondents were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that essential components of programs and practices have not been clearly defined.

Figure 10. Perceptions of Implementation Fidelity Monitoring



Item 1: It is important that teachers implement a program or practice the way it is described in a manual or during training.
Item 2: Adherence to a program or practice restricts teachers' flexibility to tailor instruction to meet students needs.
Item 3: Fidelity monitoring is a tool to improve student learning.
Item 4: Fidelity monitoring is not necessary.
Item 5: Fidelity monitoring affects school culture negatively.
Item 6: In my school setting, there is a collaborative and positive culture around fidelity monitoring.
Item 7: Essential components of programs or practices have not been defined clearly enough to justify fidelity monitoring.
Item 8: Fidelity monitoring is an essential practice for improving reading/ELA instruction.

Note. Participants did not respond to Item 6 if they reported that implementation fidelity was not monitored at their school.

Discussion

More than half of respondents (57.0%) indicated that implementation fidelity is monitored at their school at least sometimes. This proportion exceeds the 45.5% reported in a recent national survey of K–12 school-based practitioners that examined fidelity monitoring of reading interventions (Burns et al., 2025). In a 2019 survey of school psychologists, 75% of respondents reported that fidelity of tiered interventions was monitored at least sometimes (Cochrane et al., 2019)—an increase from 56% of respondents in a similar survey conducted ten years prior (Cochrane & Laux, 2008). The more recent figure exceeds what was reported by our respondents. Though results of these prior surveys provide context in which to consider the results of this survey of Iowa school practitioners, they do not serve as direct points of comparison due to differences in sampling and their exclusive focus on fidelity monitoring of reading interventions. Of Iowa practitioners who indicated that implementation fidelity is monitored, 69.8% reported that direct observation is used to monitor fidelity, which is the gold standard for fidelity monitoring (Cochrane et al., 2019; Gresham et al., 2017).

Despite relatively high rates of reported fidelity monitoring, the results of this survey suggest variation in how implementation fidelity is monitored in Iowa schools. These results align with previous research that highlights the resource-intensive nature of monitoring implementation fidelity consistently in school settings and making instructional adjustments based on collected data (Cochrane et al., 2019; Keller-Margulis, 2012). Thus, continued professional learning and resources are needed to help school leaders monitor the level of implementation of evidence-based reading instruction within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. On our survey, all respondents who indicated that fidelity is monitored also reported receiving training on implementing practices or instructional resources with fidelity, and more than 80% indicated they received ongoing coaching and professional development to support implementation. These findings suggest that preparing teachers to implement instruction with fidelity is a priority in Iowa. However, responses to other items on the Implementation Fidelity Practices Index indicate greater variability in monitoring practices.

Variation in respondents' perceptions of implementation fidelity monitoring was also evident. As reported in prior research, these survey results suggest that the tension between *fidelity* and *fit* remains an area of challenge as practitioners seek to balance adherence with tailoring instruction to meet students' needs (Harns et al., 2013). Defining essential components of evidence-based practices and curricular resources is critical to supporting practitioners in striking this balance, including how to distinguish between adaptations that preserve essential components and those that may compromise effectiveness. Clear differentiation between planned adaptations and implementation drift, including documenting planned adaptations prior to fidelity checks, is also a critical element of monitoring implementation fidelity (Sanetti et al., 2021).

The results of this study should be interpreted with consideration of several limitations. Though survey research offers an efficient means to gather information from a broad population (i.e., Iowa practitioners), there are also limitations inherent to this research method, including the potential for misinterpretation of survey items or inattentive responses. Further, participants self-reported fidelity monitoring practices employed at their school sites, and we did not independently verify implementation of practices respondents affirmed were used in their school settings, which could result in under- or overreporting of fidelity monitoring practices. Though the sample of practitioners who completed the survey was highly generalizable to Iowa schools based on school-level demographics, our recruitment methods do not eliminate the potential influence of school practitioner-level nonresponse bias on the

results. Finally, though we gathered some sources of validity evidence during survey development, psychometric analyses are needed to provide further validity evidence.

In conclusion, cultivating a positive school culture around implementation fidelity monitoring remains a challenge in some school settings. Ensuring that school practitioners responsible for monitoring implementation fidelity have had sufficient training in effective implementation fidelity monitoring practices is an important step in establishing a fidelity monitoring protocol that is collaborative and focused on continuous improvement, all in service of providing high-quality instruction that supports students' learning. Together, these factors can support practitioners in allocating limited resources toward monitoring features of implementation that matter the most. Because the effectiveness of evidence-based practices depends on high-quality implementation (Scott et al., 2019), strengthening fidelity monitoring procedures is an important step toward improving students' reading outcomes.

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