



LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Baltimore County Public Schools
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Study Purpose and Approach

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) contracted with the Maryland Initiative for Literacy & Equity (MILE) to evaluate literacy instruction across all 24 Maryland LEAs. This evaluation stems from a [joint resolution](#) by MSDE and AIB in November 2023. The evaluation was designed to focus on collaboration and capacity-building across all stakeholder groups, ultimately leading to statewide recommendations for technical assistance supporting reading development for all students in Maryland. Standard protocols were developed by translating IDA’s Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading and effective implementation research into key success indicators through MILE and AIM Institute for Learning & Research collaboration. All protocols are available for review upon request, although MILE and AIM Institute for Learning & Research maintain ownership, and other users may not adapt these protocols.

The Baltimore County Public School District's evaluation was conducted between February 2024 and May 2024. This data collection included the county's K-5 literacy plan, focus groups with teachers and principals, and targeted classroom observations. All data collection protocols, including the classroom [observation protocol](#), are aligned with a standard set of drivers and [indicators](#) of effective literacy instruction.

Review of K-5 Literacy Plans

The LEA's K-5 literacy plan was provided to MILE in January 2024. Two literacy experts reviewed it using a standard rubric developed for the purpose. After the review, the literacy experts provided written and oral feedback to the Baltimore County Public School District to revise the plan.

Review of 6-12 Literacy Plans

The LEA's 6-12 literacy plan was provided to MILE in July 2024. Again, two literacy experts reviewed it using a standard rubric developed for the purpose.

Focus Groups

To review literacy implementation across the district, four focus groups with 26 teachers were held virtually with K-5 teachers (12), reading specialists (8), and resource staff (6), and 33 focus groups were held in person with K-5 teachers and reading specialists/resource teachers. The 33 focus groups conducted in person were not anonymous, and the principals were aware of and often selected the participants.

Classroom Observations

The same rubric used to analyze the literacy plans helped inform the data collection protocols for observing literacy implementation across the district. To provide data on literacy implementation, 22 classroom observations were conducted in 11 schools. Note, however, that these visits were limited in scope and not designed to capture a representative sample due to time constraints. One literacy expert conducted classroom observations using a standard observation protocol for about 30 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

Introductory Statement

Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) embraces a comprehensive approach to literacy embedded in the Science of Reading (SoR) research. The literacy vision for the district is to support individuals in achieving their goals, developing their knowledge and potential, and participating fully in their community and the wider global community across a continuum of learning. BCPS students in grades 3-5 maintained ELA proficiency on statewide testing (MCAP) in 2023 (G3:43.9%, G4: 44.4%, G5:38.9%), which is a slight 0.2-0.9% percent increase compared to 2022. Over the 2022-23 school year, BCPS began searching for a curriculum for reading comprehension and adopted HMH Into Reading for K-5, which is used in addition to Open Court Foundational Skills for K-3. The district also employs Scholastic's *Culturally Responsive Text Collection* for rich, authentic texts representing diverse lived experiences.

The district was evaluated according to the [EPIS Framework](#) in which system-wide implementation of evidence-based practices is evaluated according to stages of Exploration, Adoption/Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainability. For **Curriculum and Instruction**, BCPS demonstrates a strong alignment of its curriculum with Maryland standards through materials like HMH's Into Reading and Open Court Foundational Skills. Teachers integrate digital and physical resources well, enhancing student vocabulary and writing skills. MILE also observed the implementation of explicit and systematic instruction, particularly observed in K-2 classrooms. Despite evidence of effective support of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in early grades, the MILE team noted limited integration of evidence-based practices across all grades. For **Professional Development**, BCPS has provided robust system-wide opportunities for professional learning in evidence-based literacy instruction, specifically for K-3 teachers and school administrators. This includes training opportunities in evidence-based literacy practices such as LETRS, supportive coaching structures like ELA specialists leading for ongoing job-embedded professional development, and collaborations between teachers and specialists linked to school improvement plans. However, there is a noted disparity in professional learning opportunities with less focus on grades 4-5. The district has established assessment and intervention resources for **Multi-tiered Support Systems**, including data meetings and structures to follow. The evidence in this report shows inconsistency in Tier II interventions and data utilization due to strains on time and personnel resources affecting systematic support for struggling students. In addition, BCPS evidenced clear support systems focusing on Universal Design for Learning (UDL). **Instructional Leadership** is a strong point, with leadership highly engaged in data-driven practices, collaborative learning about school improvement plans with clearly featured goals, and monthly meetings with reading specialists to discuss updates and guidance on teacher training. Uniformity across schools

needs to be better established. **Community Engagement** efforts vary and include Partnerships with community organizations like Baltimore County Public Library, Boys and Girls Club, and ThorpeWood for literacy programs, regular engagement with stakeholders to align initiatives and promote literacy awareness, and implementing literacy nights at Title 1 schools to foster community involvement. Despite the efforts, participation, and impact, targeted strategies are needed to enhance parental involvement in literacy initiatives.

The reviewers evaluated the implementation plan (Comprehensive Literacy Plans) for detailed strategies and approaches. Then, they determined the strength and consistency of implementation through observations of classroom instruction, interviews with administrators, and focus groups with teachers and support staff. The reviewers identified BCPS as being in the mode of moving from **early Implementation to full Implementation** around the key drivers of **Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Multi-tiered systems of support, and Instructional Leadership** based upon the work that is still ongoing to get evidence-based practices occurring systemwide. BCPS is **Sustaining** its efforts on **Community Engagement**. Recommendations include enhancing professional development for all grades, improving data-driven intervention strategies, and refining community engagement efforts to ensure equitable support for all families.

Secondary

BCPS actively engages the community in curriculum development through initiatives such as Curriculum Nights and a Citizens Review of Instructional Materials to enhance students' sense of belonging, as the BCPS Climate Survey indicates. The district's goals for secondary education are clearly defined with specific, time-bound action steps, positioning Response to Intervention (RTI) as an early warning system for student support. The central office has introduced a draft Walkthrough Tool, known as The Compass, to facilitate instructional quality through classroom visits, fostering the sharing of literacy resources and providing professional learning opportunities for educators. The comprehensive assessment system also includes periodic evaluations for grades 6-10. It is supported by Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) protocols, ensuring that both Tier I instruction and targeted Tier II, Tier III interventions address the diverse needs of students.

Key Findings: Strengths & Opportunities

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction: *Implementation (early-full)*

Grades K-5

BCPS curriculum is aligned with the Maryland College and Career Ready Standards (MCCRS). BCPS uses Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt's (HMH) Into Reading in grades K-5 and the Open Court Foundational Skills curriculum in grades K-3 to ensure that by 3rd grade, students had received ample practice with phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. These materials address the components detailed in Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001) by consistently revisiting necessary skills across each module.

System-wide expectations regarding daily interaction with text are clearly articulated based on a structured timeline with the curriculum materials. The MILE team observed BCPS grade

1 and students deducing the meaning of words in whole-group instruction and independently. Instructors focused on foundational literacy skills such as phonemic awareness through isolation, segmenting, and blending activities aligned to the phonics skill being taught.

In addition, instructors explicitly provided phonics (reading and spelling) instruction, sometimes including effective gradual release of responsibility to students. Students had opportunities to read aloud (words, sentences, text) to the teacher during literacy lessons, and teachers provided immediate feedback during decoding practice. Teachers engaged in incidental, point-of-contact teaching during whole-group and small-group interventions, which helped build student word knowledge.

Teachers utilized digital and physical copies of the Power Word vocabulary cards and reviewed text vocabulary with students. They also provided explicit instruction and practice in using independent word-learning strategies. Teachers reported an increase in student writing performance and vocabulary acquisition.

BCPS is seeking ways to align the ESOL curriculum more closely with the general education curriculum and is working to provide an IEP chairperson at each elementary school.

Grades 6-12

The curriculum emphasizes a balanced approach encompassing reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, usage, and mechanics skills, all grounded in authentic literature. The district's mission statement incorporates a commitment to culturally responsive and anti-racist curricula, with comprehensive review rubrics in place to evaluate and enhance diversity within the curriculum. The secondary literacy strategic plan delineates a structured instructional approach that includes direct instruction, guided practice, and independent practice, ensuring students receive meaningful feedback and opportunities for reflection and reteaching. Additionally, the plan prioritizes utilizing evidence-based resources to support differentiated instruction, particularly for English learners. It includes performance-based assessments to evaluate writing standards, supplemented by the DBQ Project for research-based writing in social studies.

2.0 Professional Learning: *Implementation (early-full)*

Grades K-5

BCPS has provided systematic opportunities for professional learning in evidence-based literacy instruction. Specifically, K-3 teachers and school administrators have had the opportunity to receive instruction through Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training or to complete three modules developed by BCPS on the Science of Reading. Teachers have also received professional learning related to curricular materials conducted by representatives from HMH.

Some general education teachers, paraeducators, and resource teachers have completed Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS) and Orton-Gillingham training through the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education (IMSE). Teachers in grades 4-5 have received fewer opportunities for professional learning in foundational reading skills and fewer opportunities for professional learning in assessing and implementing Tier 2 interventions.

In addition to the professional learning opportunities the school district provides, the individual schools also provide teachers with information during faculty meetings and professional development days. The topics covered range from equity and inclusion to conscious discipline to examples of instructional practices shared with teachers.

BCPS teachers can engage in professional learning before, during, and after school. If they opt into training outside their contractual obligations, they are provided a stipend. In addition, multiple schools are engaged in learning walk-throughs and have opportunities to engage in reflective practices within and with other schools. In schools staffed with resource teachers, colleagues consistently noted the positive impact that their coaching and training sessions had on their instructional practice and progress monitoring of student literacy learning.

Grades 6-12

The secondary curriculum mirrors the K–5 framework while incorporating additional elements, including a Professional Learning Community (PLC) of teachers who engage in monthly professional development sessions with national Hip Hop educators. The Office of English Language Arts offers training in the science of reading, specifically targeting secondary special educators and reading teachers, with central office staff also encouraged to participate. Training offerings include the third edition of Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), which enhances educators' foundational knowledge. Additionally, leadership conducting formal observations of intervention programs is required to complete "Initial Overview Training," perform informal classroom visits using the Look For Tool and collaborate with reading specialists to identify professional learning supports before formal evaluations of intervention teachers utilizing the Classroom Diagnostic Framework (CDF).

3.0 Multi-Tiered Support Systems: *Implementation (early-full)*

Grades K-5

BCPS data meetings occur across grade levels and schools and are implemented regularly at most schools. Schools often involve key stakeholders in data meetings (e.g., grade-level team members, resource teachers, administrators, etc.). Resource teachers are pivotal in organizing and making sense of grade-level data. The literacy plan includes directions that outline the number of minutes typically spent on each component of reading instruction. Based on student learning data, the intervention and support plan demonstrates how this may change for some students.

The implementation of Tier II interventions (as well as the use of specific materials) varies across school settings. According to focus group responses, many teachers need to provide Tier II support systematically due to reported time constraints or a lack of knowledge or confidence regarding materials and intervention implementation. Additionally, while some teachers report using the materials provided by the district for Tier II intervention, some reported choosing to use materials from previous curricula, such as guided reading passages.

Grades 6-12

A comprehensive assessment system encompasses state, local, school, and teacher assessment data. In grades 6-8, all students complete periodic assessments after each of the four units of study, while grades 9-10 feature similar assessments after the first three units. Alongside Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) protocols, the district conducts beginning, middle,

and end-of-year data meetings, with Response to Intervention (RTI) systems establishing clear protocols for student support. Tier I instruction within English Language Arts (ELA) classes provides a high-quality, standards-based curriculum and instruction enhanced by differentiation and flexible grouping. Students receiving Tier II interventions, designated for those exhibiting challenges based on screening measures or insufficient progress, access supplemental reading instruction focused on code-based and text-based strategies. Specific Tier II programs include Read 180 and iLit for middle and high school, respectively. Tier III interventions, such as Visualize and Verbalize and Wilson, cater to students requiring more intensive support after insufficient progress in Tier II.

4.0 Instructional Leadership: *Implementation (full)*

Grades K-5

Instructional leaders and administrators have received LETRS training for administrators and often lead literacy data meetings with their staff. In contrast, monthly principal and teacher-leader meetings build collaboration and capacity within instructional teams. These meetings happen systematically at the school level. During focus group discussions, ESOL teachers described their knowledge of district literacy initiatives regarding changes to their curriculum and a potential co-teaching model, suggesting collaboration and messaging between varying administrator roles and departments has been successful.

Evidence of a professional calendar was noted as teachers discussed professional learning opportunities on SOR during focus groups—the courses being part of the district initiative and the ongoing professional learning from resource teachers at the school level. Teachers also report that more consistent data meetings may help increase communication with all members of instructional teams. Teachers reported uneven access to ongoing support. For example, some teachers were provided UFLI materials from their principal and relied on independent exploration to make sense of the training, while others had formalized coaching.

Grades 6-12

The goals for secondary grades are articulated with specific, time-bound action steps, positioning Response to Intervention (RTI) as the early warning system for student support. The central office provides a draft of the Walkthrough Tool, The Compass, which facilitates classroom visits by principals and instructional leadership teams. These visits emphasize instructional quality by promoting the sharing ideas and resources related to literacy instruction while offering professional learning opportunities, including coaching, to enhance teacher expertise. Engagement with student focus groups from various BCPS schools is also implemented to inform curriculum writing, implementation, and revision processes.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement: *Sustainment*

Grades K-5

BCPS has created a community and school engagement culture that invites parents, caregivers, and community members to connect with the schools through initiatives such as book fairs, literacy nights, and school newsletters. However, parent and caregiver participation is often low, especially around events focused on implementing foundational literacy skills. It is important to note that many K-3 instructors report that they believe parents, caregivers, and community members need more opportunities to learn about the shift in literacy that the Science of Reading has facilitated.

Grades 6-12

BCPS organizes Curriculum Nights and conducts a Citizens Review of Instructional Materials to facilitate community engagement in the curriculum development process. The anticipated outcomes of these curriculum revisions include enhancing students' sense of belonging, as evidenced by findings from the BCPS Climate Survey.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

We recommend that BCPS enhance curriculum support for teachers and instructional team members, specifically in grades 4 and 5, to ensure they can access curricular materials that provide Tier I and Tier II support for readers to build foundational literacy skills.

Providing support for implementing Tier I materials and building greater connections to current curricular materials within and between grade levels will ensure greater horizontal and vertical alignment, leading to greater adoption (seeing how it works together) of new curricular materials.

As evidenced by BCPS:

- *“The Office of ELA has developed a framework for teachers of grades 4 and 5 for implementing the HMH Into Reading Foundational Skills strand to increase explicitness of instruction and provided professional learning for all teachers in June or August 2024.*
- *All teachers of grades 4 and 5 will participate in the science of reading professional learning either through LETRS volume 1 or BCPS created modules for the 2024 – 2025 SY.*
- *A Pilot of 95 Percent Foundational Skills curriculum in grades K-5 will be conducted in several schools.*
- *Elementary English Language Development (ELD) teachers will implement the Into Reading Tabletop lessons to strengthen language instruction for Multilingual Learners.”*

Grades 6-12

The secondary curriculum should be assessed for its alignment with the five core components of effective literacy instruction. Additionally, it is important to evaluate whether the framework corresponds with established models, such as those proposed by Muhammad (2023). There should be ongoing monitoring of progress related to teachers' utilization of evidence-based resources that emphasize scaffolded and differentiated instruction, particularly for English learners and dialectical speakers, as well as for vocabulary development and language comprehension strategies. Furthermore, BCPS is encouraged to enhance its emphasis on writing across content areas beyond social studies, advocating for explicit instruction in writing, integrating reading and writing activities, and appropriate scaffolding for students requiring additional support.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

We recommend that future professional learning opportunities include ongoing coaching and job-embedded professional development focused on best practices for supporting literacy learning for special education students and multilingual learners.

Implementation of instruction for K-3 teachers has directly benefited from professional development opportunities. For example, schools where teachers have received Orton-Gillingham training have incorporated more multisensory activities into their practice. In addition, it is recommended that BCPS also provide more opportunities for professional learning around evidence-based practices related to vocabulary development and comprehension connected to curricular materials K-5.

Due to the students' literacy needs and the inclusion of foundational reading skills in the HMH curriculum, this same training is needed for fourth—and fifth-grade teachers, who often lack understanding and confidence when teaching foundational reading skills. It is important to build these teachers' capacity to meet the needs of students during small group intervention (Tier II) and incorporate practices into Tier I instruction.

Professional learning in BCPS may benefit from creating a repository of video lessons from highly effective teacher leaders and from incorporating lesson analysis into collaborative planning and coaching sessions. More job-embedded, practice-based coaching and forming PLCs around evidence-based literacy practices would help build capacity to strengthen the integration of SoR across elementary literacy instruction.

As evidenced by BCPS:

- *“In 2023-2024, all PreK-3 teachers have completed SoR professional learning for word recognition to strengthen instruction in phonological awareness and decoding.*
- *In 2024-2025, all PreK-3 teachers will participate in the SoR professional learning to focus on vocabulary, comprehension and written expression either through LETRS volume 2 or BCPS created modules.*
- *In 2024-2025, all teachers of grades 4-5 will participate in the science of reading professional learning either through LETRS volume 1 or BCPS created modules.*
- *Staff Development Teachers and Reading Specialists will participate in professional learning focusing on how to coach for the implementation of evidence-based strategies to support curriculum implementation. Implementation guidance and Look-For Tools for evidence-based practices from the LETRS modules will continue to be utilized.*
- *Model lessons for the different instructional components of Into Reading (i.e. vocabulary, close reading, collaborative conversations) will be videotaped and a repository of professional learning resources will be developed.*
- *LETRS Bridge to Practice activities will be scheduled as PLC work led by a district facilitator to support the implementation of science of reading into classroom practice.”*

Grades 6-12

The challenges of implementing effective instructional strategies within the time constraints of the secondary level must be addressed systematically. It is essential to ensure content

teachers receive professional development focused on strategy instruction to enhance their pedagogical effectiveness. Additionally, providing teachers with training on the observation tool is critical to facilitating meaningful instructional improvements and support.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

Reading specialists and instructors help share information on instructional needs across grade levels and work to adjust the intensity of instruction for each component based on data and student needs. However, there is an opportunity to enhance teacher professional knowledge by adjusting the time and intensity of instruction for each component within a literacy based on analysis of multiple data sources and student needs.

In addition, better alignment between the BCPS literacy block framework and the curricular resources would allow teachers to work to improve pacing as implementation and familiarity with the curriculum improves.

Finally, implementing small group instruction must be more fully connected through the HMM curriculum, which teachers reported often kept them from facilitating small group interventions. Also, greater systematicity of data analysis across schools and increasing data review frequency would help guide Tier II instruction.

Progress monitoring for Tier II instruction is sometimes more informal and based on real-time classroom observations (rather than data), impacting who receives small group instruction. More systematic use of data from assessments such as MAP, Amira, and DIBELS may help drive more effective MTSS targeted at students' specific skill-based needs.

Supporting greater connection to general education curriculum goals and creating more opportunities for connections between classroom teachers and SPED or ESOL teachers in school settings where students are pulled out for intervention support will help to increase the effectiveness of tier 2 interventions.

As evidenced by BCPS:

- *“BCPS will increase opportunities for teacher training in Orton-Gillingham and SIPPS to provide systematic Tier 2 and 3 literacy interventions.*
- *Implementation guidance will continue to be provided for the Into Reading Instructional Components and Science of Reading instructional practices.*
- *A planning protocol was provided to Reading Specialists during the May 2024 meeting. This protocol will be used by instructional coaches to support responsive planning and pacing.*
- *Intervention data for Tier II and III instruction will be monitored in Performance Matters to target support to schools when students are not making growth. Guidance and professional learning will be developed with the Office of Special Education and the Office of Multilingual Achievement to ensure consistency.”*

Grades 6-12

The plan should explicitly reference the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework in relevant sections to promote inclusive instructional practices. Additionally, it is important to

clearly delineate the student profile associated with the Visualize and Verbalize intervention program. Furthermore, assessments that effectively determine whether a student requires intervention in specific areas of need should be identified.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5

Suggestions for school-based, collaborative professional learning include providing opportunities for teachers to participate in structured learning walks so that instructors can view examples of effective practices for literacy learning after receiving feedback from coaches. This can be accomplished through Professional Learning Communities, where relevant teachers, administrators, and staff collaborate to conduct learning walks at their school sites and other schools. According to teacher feedback, learning walks occur at some but not all schools.

Additional suggestions include creating opportunities within schools to empower strong teachers to transition to teacher leadership roles. These could allow for greater resources to provide job-embedded coaching, as teachers seek.

As evidenced by BCPS:

- *“Learning walks with executive leadership and principals will be conducted during each semester as a continuation from the 23-24 school year. Additional learning walks with Reading Specialists will happen quarterly.*
- *Model lessons for the different instructional components of Into Reading (i.e. vocabulary, close reading, collaborative conversations) will be videotaped and a repository of professional learning resources will be developed and shared during the first quarter.*
- *Teacher Leader Corp (TLC) professional learning sessions focused on Into Reading implementation using evidenced-practices will continue for the 2024-2025 SY to continue to build teacher leadership. Based on data collected, the three sessions will focus on one of the topics: Writing Instruction, Responsive Instruction Using Data, and Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies for Reading.”*

Grades 6-12

The early warning system should be expanded to incorporate additional metrics for comprehensive student monitoring. The district's efforts to solicit student feedback are commendable; however, further methods for collecting feedback at the secondary level should be explored. Additionally, it is essential to evaluate whether the walkthrough tool is aligned with the established instructional guides.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5

BCPS provides various resources to engage and inform parents, such as Parent University, Back-to-School Fest, and the BCPS Office of ELA webpage. While the efforts to engage parents vary, as does parent participation, focus group feedback suggested that Title 1 Schools engaged caregivers the most regarding providing reading strategies and materials. As discussed with leadership, because a variety of successful efforts are happening at the individual school level and separately at the district level, efforts to communicate and share

