



LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Dorchester 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 Dorchester County Public Schools was evaluated 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 to 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 experts provided written and oral feedback to Dorchester County Public Schools 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

Two teacher focus groups, several individual interviews, and one principal focus group were conducted to review literacy implementation across the district. Twelve district teachers, principals, and staff participated in interviews and focus groups, providing insight into literacy implementation in schools and classrooms. Although the research team protected participant privacy, LEA staff knew which individuals were included in each prospective sample.

Classroom Observations

The same rubric used to analyze the literacy plans helped inform the data collection protocols for observing literacy implementation across the district. Eight classroom observations were conducted in April 2024 to provide data on classroom literacy implementation. 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 15 or 45 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

LEA Background and Context

In Dorchester County Public School District (DCPS), roughly 34-35% of students in grades 3-5 achieved proficiency on the 2022-2023 MCAP, and only 33-34% of 10th and 12th-grade students met the benchmarks for College and Career Readiness in Language Arts. Performance for historically marginalized groups reveals nearly 30-39% fewer students meet these early benchmarks than their peers. The district has embraced a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction focused on the learner's needs and aligned to the Science of Reading (SoR) research. The district's goals are to ensure that administrators and teachers from PK-12 are trained in these principles and to increase proficiency rates in literacy to meet the College and Career Ready standards, particularly for historically marginalized learners and those with disabilities. During the 2023-24 school year, the district implemented evidence-aligned curricula, training its leadership and school personnel in the SoR and structured literacy practices. The district leadership and ELA coordinators developed a well-detailed, ambitious Comprehensive Literacy Plan (CLP).

The district was evaluated according to the [EPIS Framework](#), which evaluates system-wide implementation of evidence-based practices according to stages of exploration, adoption/preparation, implementation, and sustainment. For **Curriculum and Instruction**, DCPS has aligned its curriculum with Maryland standards with the implementation programs for foundational skills and knowledge building, comprehension, and integrated writing. These curricula are rich in diverse text and provide scaffolds for multilingual learners (MLs), and strong implementation was observed. **Professional Learning** opportunities are robust and include LETRS training for K-5 teachers. Literacy education is supported through regular training sessions provided by vendors, who provide opportunities for support from reading specialists/coaches who collaborate with staff in planning, data analysis, and intervention support. However, teachers and administrators have noted how the loss of these supports in light of budgetary challenges is already impacting implementation, particularly for ML students and those with disabilities. DCPS has a well-developed model for **Multi-Tiered Support Systems** with a robust data-driven process that includes differentiation, push-in and pull-out instruction, and one-on-one teacher-student conferences. DIBELS, MAP, and IRLA assessments are used for screening, assessment, and progress monitoring with data systems like mClass to identify student needs. The greatest challenge is planning time for teachers with literacy coaches to review data and provide the necessary Tier II/III interventions. Strong **Instructional Leadership**, from central administration to school leadership, is evident in the planning and implementation. School leaders are involved in professional learning, assessment, and intervention, ensuring implementation fidelity through walk-throughs. **Community Engagement** in DCPS is active and involves literacy events for families, home learning materials, and updates on student learning. Teachers and administrators spoke highly of the efforts of schools to reach out to families and communities.

Secondary

The district implements HMH Into Literature with Writable for all core English Language Arts (ELA) classes in grades 6-12, focusing on reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking and listening skills. Teachers will receive professional development on the Science of Reading (SoR) from Really Great Reading Company, with plans for full implementation of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Literature by the 2024-25 school year, incorporating Writing Revolution activities to enhance writing skills. Additionally, the district provides an assessment overview for grades 6-12 and employs literacy coaches to support educators, including collaboration with ESOL instructors for English Language Learners (ELLs). For the 2024-2025 school year, teachers will pilot IXL and Khanmigo to enhance Tier II interventions. The district utilizes various diagnostic assessments within its Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework.

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 DCPS as moving from **implementation to sustainability** in the key drivers of Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Multi-tiered systems of support, Instructional Leadership, and Community Engagement.

Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction: *Implementation/Sustainability*

Grades K-5

The foundational skills curriculum, including vocabulary and fluency, is consistently implemented across grade levels. DCPS combined CKLA and ARC to serve all literacy components and used CKLA to transition to a structured literacy program. The American Reading Company (ARC) literacy program addresses vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing, emphasizing building knowledge through reading and writing. The program is rich in diverse texts.

The curriculum integrates writing instruction from both programs and connects to text. The MILE team observed students engaged in language comprehension activities that included KWL, finding text evidence, and identifying characters' traits, evident in transitions into writing.

The discussion of ESOL/ELL work highlights the CLP as RELA instructional materials are chosen to ensure culturally relevant instruction and support differentiation. ARC uses texts with various culturally diverse narratives and characters, and the district has a policy to ensure that textbooks reflect national diversity.

Teachers encouraged continued learning by giving students fluent Spanish books written in both languages. The district also provides schools with larger proportions of ML students with more time with support staff.

Math teachers reported that classes have benefitted from the improvement in literacy. However, some teachers reported concerns about needing more planning time to meet the needs of all students.

Although ELL students receive support from CKLA and have one-on-one push-in support in class, teachers and administrators expressed concern that they need more time to progress.

Grades 6-12

The district employs HMH Into Literature with Writable for all core English Language Arts (ELA) classes in grades 6-12, focusing on reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking and listening instruction. Teachers will receive professional development on the Science of Reading (SoR) through Really Great Reading Company, and materials will be evaluated for cultural relevance using the Reading League Science of Reading Curriculum Adoption Guide. By the 2024-25 school year, all core ELA classes are expected to fully implement Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Literature with Writable, incorporating Writing Revolution activities to strengthen grammar and writing skills. Additionally, classroom teachers collaborate with ESOL instructors to provide individualized support for English

Language Learners (ELLs), while Vocabulary.com is utilized for supplemental vocabulary instruction aligned with the curriculum.

2.0 Professional Learning: *Implementation/Sustainability*

Grades K-5

All elementary teachers and many instructional assistants are LETRS-trained. DCPS has used LETRS training for almost 20 years through various editions and has in-district trainers for the newest edition. The training is mandatory for all elementary teachers and available for instructional assistants and special education teachers.

In focus groups, teachers indicated they received training to use data to adjust groups for Tiered instruction.

The district provides professional development from CKLA and ARC through classroom observations and model lessons provided by vendor representatives.

The crossover from LETRS training to the CKLA phonics program helps teachers implement it with fidelity. DCPS supports training all classroom teachers, provides support through classroom visits, and models lessons from the vendor.

Some teachers reported that participating in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for planning and data review is difficult because of time constraints. They also reported needing enhanced training and support for students with disabilities.

Grades 6-12

The district emphasizes its commitment to ongoing professional development, supported by the integration of literacy coaches. For the 2024-2025 school year, teachers in grades 6-12 will receive training on implementing a pilot program using IXL and Khanmigo to enhance Tier II interventions for students. In the previous school year, educators focused on norming writing scores and identifying exemplary student writing models, with plans to further develop activities that utilize these samples to enhance student understanding of writing rubrics and expectations. Additionally, all K-12 administrators and grades 6-12 teachers will receive training in the Science of Reading (SoR) from Really Great Reading Company in August 2024, while literacy coaches will conduct non-evaluative walkthroughs to provide constructive feedback.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems: *Implementation/Sustainability*

Grades K-5

DCPS assesses all students in grades K-5 through the DIBELS assessment three times per year.

The MILE team observed teachers using information and resources from mClass to diagnose and monitor the progress of students with foundational skills gaps. DCPS also utilizes Lexia's Adaptive (blended learning) Program, which monitors progress and adjusts instruction using embedded measures during learning (as a technology tool).

In data meetings, teachers review the alignment between DIBELS and other assessments (IRLA) and schedule students for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. However, reports from focus groups suggest that this varies from school to school, and some schools need help with using valuable planning time for these meetings.

Systemwide implementation of CKLA and differentiation components for Tier II instruction. Lexia and Toolkits are used in the ARC program. Student groupings are flexible, and one-on-one conferences are routine.

Grades 6-12

The district identifies several screeners and diagnostic assessments utilized for secondary Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), including the HMH Reading Growth Measure, Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) screener, Advanced Decoding Survey, and HMH unit writing diagnostics, along with established assessment cut-off criteria. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) recommendations inform the curriculum development process, integrating research-based instructional strategies and aligning credit designations for specific content courses. District and school teams engage in data-driven decision-making to inform instruction, resource allocation, and the identification of disabilities, adhering to a framework that comprises four key components: universal screening, progress monitoring, a multi-level prevention system, and data-based decision-making. A flowchart is also included to illustrate the secondary MTSS and progress monitoring processes.

4.0 Instructional Leadership: *Implementation/Sustainability*

Grades K-5

DCPS trains School principals and assistant principals to support literacy through LETRS for administrators and on how to monitor school literacy data. They continue to receive training on new programs. The MILE team observed that school leaders are very involved in data collection and analysis. Administrators mentioned supporting teachers by providing time for PLCs and lesson studies for Tier I, II, and III instruction. Administrators and teachers mentioned that they need reading coaches to support teachers in reading the data and responding to student groups' needs. However, with the loss of existing funding, these coaches may be available elsewhere.

Grades 6-12

The district presents an assessment overview for students in grades 6-12, detailing the minimum required assessments and their general timelines, such as Beginning of Year (BOY) and End of Year (EOY) assessments. Additionally, a copy of the AVID curriculum-agnostic

walkthrough tool has been provided. Oversight of K-12 literacy initiatives and curriculum, along with secondary college and career readiness through the AVID program, is managed by the Supervisor of K-12 Reading English Language Arts and 6-12 AVID. Support for teachers in implementing these literacy initiatives is facilitated by a district middle school literacy coach assigned to North Dorchester Middle School, Maces Lane Middle School, and South Dorchester 6-8, as well as a high school literacy coach working with Cambridge-South Dorchester High School and North Dorchester High School.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement: *Implementation/Sustainability*

Grades K-5

Administrators and teachers articulated the importance of getting parents involved in literacy. They ensure that ML learners are supported in Spanish and English. They also provide at-home materials for all students and hold various events to engage the community. Schools have Family Literacy events, “One School, One Book” events, Peak of the Week newsletters, ARC family nights, and books sent home through the 100 Book Challenge (ARC). Lexia is often completed at home. Schools have used meals at events to ensure families have time to come, using the community liaison to provide buses to bring families to events and Spelling Bees.

Grades 6-12

In August 2024, all K-12 school administrators and teachers in grades 6-12 will undergo the Science of Reading (SOR) training through the Really Great Reading Company. Additionally, the district will offer ongoing refresher training sessions on SOR during workshop-style professional development days for all grades K-12. A six-hour workshop focusing on SOR will be provided specifically for secondary teachers implementing HD Word materials in the 2024-2025 school year. Furthermore, one middle school reading intervention teacher has already begun piloting HD Word materials after receiving training from Really Great Reading in 2023. The district also outlines examples of collaboration and engagement among parents, guardians, and community stakeholders.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

Continue to explore opportunities to make connections to align the two Core products—CKLA and ARC. Continue to monitor leveled reading to ensure students can choose books that engage and interest them from various reading levels. Ensure all students are exposed to grade-level text regularly.

Continue to review data and use push-in and pull-out small group lessons to close gaps and meet the needs of diverse students who require tailored intervention through focused instruction based on DIBELS data.

To address concerns about EL students' progress, continue to review data and use push-in and pull-out small group lessons to close gaps for EL students and students with special education needs.

Grades 6-12

The plan must clarify the alignment of the five core components of literacy instruction for grades 6-8 and how the curriculum addresses these elements. Incorporating a Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE) framework, as outlined by Muhammad (2023), would enhance the plan by emphasizing identity-building, skill development, intellectual application, and criticality. Additionally, the plan should detail explicit, systematic, and scaffolded Tier I literacy instruction based on evidence-aligned principles and address the integration of scaffolds for dialectal speakers. While the Tier I menus for word study, reading comprehension, and writing provide comprehensive instructional methods, further guidance on their effective implementation and the integration of Writing Revolution activities across content areas is necessary.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

The plan states that all grade 4-12 RELA teachers will be trained in the science of reading by 2028. Support for grade 4-5 teachers will be needed to understand the MTSS process, particularly for foundational skills, and align and foster explicit instructional approaches to comprehension, knowledge-building, and writing that may not have been standard practice in classrooms. These teachers are included in the vendors' upcoming structured literacy and MTSS training.

Grades 6-12

The plan should incorporate professional learning communities for teachers in grades 6-12 to enhance collaboration and instructional practices. Additionally, it should outline the frequency and nature of coaching support, including details on walkthroughs and feedback mechanisms. A clear description of how professional development aligns vertically with the district's long-term vision is essential. Furthermore, the plan must specify the professional learning opportunities designed to support Tier I content teachers and Tier III interventionists, along with detailed information regarding the ongoing observation and feedback cycle.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

Given the reported variability between schools in holding data meetings and Tier II support time, the district should consider ways to ensure consistency across schools (see 4.0).

The district might consider enhancing the capacity of Instructional Assistants to support the intervention groups they handle

Create interventions for underserved groups (physically, academically, and behaviorally challenged learners).

Grades 6-12

The plan should be enhanced by including comprehensive details regarding the routine data meetings, as it currently needs to be determined whether a specific schedule is established to facilitate regular data reviews, ideally occurring at least once per month. Additionally, the plan should specify how Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles will be integrated and aligned to support student learning effectively. Further elaboration is needed on the use of progress monitoring tools to identify and track specific skills for students requiring additional support, particularly those in Tier II and Tier III interventions. Only the HMH writing diagnostic is currently referenced as an ongoing progress monitoring tool.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5

Some schools seemed more consistent with PLCs and data meetings than others. The district might consider making these part of the master school schedule so all teachers can participate. Providing coverage time would give teachers the planning time needed for differentiation and Tier II instruction.

Additionally, a strong need has been expressed to support personnel through reading specialists to help with data interpretation and instructional planning.

Grades 6-12

The plan should clearly outline the short-term, mid-term, and long-term implementation strategies for achieving goals at the secondary level. Additionally, it would be beneficial to specify the schedule for data meetings to ensure consistency and accountability. The alignment of walkthrough tools and protocols with IDA guidelines is essential for effective evaluation. Furthermore, it is important to establish protocols that guarantee literacy coaches provide equitable support to the schools they serve, along with identifying the resources available at the school level to sustain the practices promoted by these coaches. Lastly, a framework should be established to hold school and district leaders accountable for addressing staffing gaps in literacy support.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5

Utilizing school climate data, particularly around literacy instruction and curriculum, may provide insight into growing gaps in achievement.

Grades 6-12



The district should delineate the necessary next steps for monitoring the implementation of the SOR training sessions. It would be beneficial to clarify whether refresher training is mandatory and to outline the mechanisms for obtaining teacher feedback to ensure the fidelity and sustainability of the program. Additionally, the plan should explicitly incorporate opportunities for engaging parents and guardians and community partnerships to address the literacy strengths and needs at the secondary level, with ongoing initiatives occurring at least once a month. Finally, describing how climate and culture data will be addressed within the secondary education framework is essential.