

LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency

Garrett County Public Schools

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 collaboration with MILE and AIM Institute for Learning & Research. 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.

Garrett County Public Schools (GCPS) was evaluated between March 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 and updated in May 2024. Two literacy experts reviewed this plan using a standard rubric developed for the purpose. After the review, the literacy experts provided written and oral feedback to Garrett 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. Nine 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 to observe literacy implementation across the district. Twelve classroom observations were conducted in 1 school 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 about 20 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

Introductory Statement

GCPS embraces a comprehensive approach to literacy embedded in the Science of Reading (SoR) research. The literacy vision of the district seeks to strengthen literacy outcomes for k-12 learners by increasing targeted teacher professional development regarding strategies and high-quality instructional material. The GCPS literacy mission involves increasing teacher instructional capacity and resources to increase literacy outcomes. MCAP proficiency rates for 3rd Grade have increased over the past three testing cycles, from 30% in 2019 to 50.4% in 2023. The district has implemented the comprehensive literacy plan for 6 years. The plan invests in professional development and purchasing materials for staff and administration to implement evidence-based practices. 2023-2024, the district developed a draft of High-Quality Instructional Materials, evidence-based strategies, and intervention guides. They provided professional learning for principals and PK-3 teachers on evidence-based literacy practices and for all PK-5 staff on implementing their curriculum in the daily literacy block and across the content.

Garrett County Public Schools (GCPS) 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 Sustainment. For **Curriculum and Instruction**, GCPS demonstrates a solid commitment to instruction that aligns with evidence-based practices, as evidenced by clear system-wide expectations and ongoing professional development. All K-3 teachers receive LETRS training and ongoing support from district-based literacy coaches, who oversee multiple schools and supplement manuals to ensure effective pacing. MILE team noted engaged students, teachers implementing instructional practices, student familiarity with routines, and teachers using materials reflecting evidence-based literacy practices. Provide training around differentiation in K-2 classrooms. For **Professional Development**, GCPS provides comprehensive professional learning for K-5 teachers through curriculum-specific training, LETRS sessions for PK-3 educators, and ongoing training on evidence-based literacy tools. Professional learning communities assess student progress and address curriculum needs, alternating between countywide and school-level sessions focused on data-driven insights and district requirements. Recent initiatives include peer-to-peer and mentor-based coaching among teachers, with plans to sustain support even if literacy instruction coaches face budget challenges in the upcoming school year. Training for paraprofessionals emphasizes small group literacy instruction, particularly in grades 4-5, ensuring equitable support across Title I and non-Title I schools. Areas for improvement include enhancing knowledge about differentiating instruction practices in K-2 classrooms and clarifying the role of paraprofessionals in providing instructional support. **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support** include varying assessments used for Tiers 1, 2, and 3 and aligned data protocols. In addition, i-Ready diagnostics and protocols are utilized and shared as guiding resources. As work aligned with MTSS grows, consider structures for collecting participant feedback and ongoing coaching models for stakeholders leading Tiers 2 and 3.

Instructional Leadership receives curriculum training to support and evaluate teachers. At the same time, protocols are taught to unfamiliar teachers for consistent implementation, bolstered by ongoing support from literacy coaches and district ELA administrators. Leadership might benefit from establishing networks for school leaders to explore and share learning walk protocols with teachers and other initiatives integrated with Title I and Non-Title I schools. **Community Culture and Engagement** evidenced active

communication of MSDE and CCPSD initiatives to various stakeholders. They implemented initiatives like the One School One Book program, Computer Take Home Read Program, needs-based assessments by community specialists, and library partnerships to engage families. These efforts might be enhanced by ensuring that teachers are trained to integrate knowledge of students' literacy traditions and cultural assets into the curriculum. These steps aim to enhance student learning outcomes and community involvement in literacy efforts across GCPS schools.

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 GCPS as being in the mode of **Implementing** around the key drivers of Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Multi-tiered systems of support, and Instructional Leadership, and are transitioning between **Fully Preparing and Implementing** for Community Engagement. Recommendations include providing additional training on differentiated instruction, ensuring sustained coaching support amidst funding uncertainties, and implementing more explicit protocols for data-driven decision-making in tiered interventions.

Secondary

The district provides a comprehensive scope and sequence for literacy instruction in grades 6-8, which includes vocabulary, comprehension, and writing standards while emphasizing a culturally responsive and equitable teaching framework to achieve literacy goals by the 2026-27 school year. Grounded in evidence-based research and the Science of Reading (SoR), the district's literacy initiative aims to deliver consistent and effective structured literacy instruction for all students from birth through grade 12. Additionally, the Professional Development (PD) Study Group has analyzed educator feedback from surveys conducted in June 2023 and May 2024, identifying key themes to inform ongoing professional development and improve working conditions for educators. The district's long-term goals also include ensuring that by 2027, 100% of English Language Arts (ELA) teachers implement high-quality instruction aligned with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, as well as increasing parent satisfaction ratings by the end of the 2026-2027 school year, based on School Climate Survey results.

Key Strength & Opportunities

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction: *Implementing*

Grades K-5

GCPS uses a variety of resources to meet student needs.

System-wide expectations are clearly articulated regarding expectations about pacing and structure. The MILE team observed that all K-3 teachers have LETRS training and ongoing support through district-based literacy coaches who provide ongoing support to assigned schools. All schools have a designated literacy coach; each coach has several schools on their roster. Coaches supplement the use of manuals for pacing and structure. Additionally, the MILE team observed explicit vocabulary and reading instruction. Students seemed very familiar with the classroom routines during vocabulary instruction.

However, the MILE team observed no differentiation in K-2 classrooms, and paraprofessional responsibilities seemed exclusively aligned with their assignment to individual students and monitoring behaviors with limited to no role in instruction.

Grades 6-12

The district offers a link to grade-level standards and a detailed scope and sequence for literacy instruction, specifically for grades 6-8, encompassing vocabulary, comprehension, and writing standards. It emphasizes the application of a culturally responsive and equitable teaching framework in planning and instruction to meet literacy goals by the target year of 2026-27. The district advocates for coherent and systematic literacy instruction grounded in evidence-based research and the Science of Reading (SoR), asserting that its literacy initiative aims to ensure consistent and effective structured literacy instruction for all students from birth through grade 12. Additionally, the district provides a scope and sequence for secondary grades, including vocabulary development, language comprehension, and writing standards, alongside a link to the IES practice guide on teaching academic content and literacy to elementary and middle school English learners.

2.0 Professional Learning: *Implementing*

Grades K-5

GCPS provides professional learning opportunities to ensure the K-5 teaching staff is trained using curriculum-specific materials. The district provided all PK-3 teachers with LETRS training, and all classroom teachers have been trained on specific intervention tools aligned with evidence-based literacy practices.

Professional learning communities are used for additional curriculum training and the evaluation of student progress. At the district level, the teachers stated that countywide professional learning communities are held three of the nine months, with the other five to six being provided at the school level. The school-level administration and literacy coaches determine specific topics to be addressed. Still, all are centered around data obtained from classroom walk-throughs, professional learning community meetings, and district teaching requirements.

Some teachers at several schools have recently had peer-to-peer and mentor-based coaching opportunities. The administration discussed exploring ways of sustaining support and coaching for teachers if literacy instruction coaches are not covered in the LEA budget for the 2024-2025 school year.

The district also provides training opportunities for paraprofessionals to support classroom teachers with small group literacy instruction, especially in grades 4-5, to create internal support for teachers. Equitable support is also in place to balance support for Title I and non-Title I schools.

Grades 6-12

Teachers are encouraged to consult with teacher specialists, such as Reading Academic Intervention Teachers or Literacy Coaches, as well as Supervisors, for recommendations. Feedback from educators was gathered through surveys conducted in June 2023 and May 2024. The Professional Development (PD) Study Group analyzed this feedback, identifying several key themes that informed the decisions presented in this plan. The PD Study Group will continue to convene to ensure the district's ongoing progress in enhancing the working conditions for educators throughout the county.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems: *Implementing*

Grades K-5

GCPS ensures comprehensive professional learning for K-5 teachers through curriculum-specific training, LETRS sessions for PK-3 educators, and ongoing training on evidence-based literacy tools. Professional learning communities assess student progress and address curriculum needs, alternating between countywide and school-level sessions focused on data-driven insights and district requirements. Recent initiatives include peer-to-peer and mentor-based coaching among teachers, with plans to sustain support even if literacy instruction coaches face budget challenges in the upcoming school year. Training for paraprofessionals emphasizes small group literacy instruction, particularly in grades 4-5, ensuring equitable support across Title I and non-Title I schools.

Grades 6-12

The district has outlined and explained the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, with a professional development goal of ensuring that by 2027, 100% of English Language Arts (ELA) teachers deliver high-quality instruction that incorporates UDL principles. Clear data protocols and resources, including a Response to Intervention flow chart, allow teachers to analyze data. Additionally, the district provides graphs illustrating student achievement categorized by gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and service groups, specifically for grades 6 and 10.

4.0 Instructional Leadership: *Implementing*

Grades K-5

GCPS system-wide and school-based administrators receive training in the curriculum to better support and evaluate teachers.

Additionally, teachers unfamiliar with the curriculum train in protocols to help ensure fidelity and consistency among classes. Literacy coaches and other ELA district-based administrators support teachers.

Grades 6-12

The district has outlined long-term goals accompanied by specific action steps. GCPS has developed a Professional Development Plan to support staff's professional growth and a calendar of opportunities. A new calendar for professional development will be created for the 2024-2025 school year. District leaders will redesign and align the walkthrough tool to assess high-quality instruction by leveraging the adopted resources.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement: *Fully Preparing/ Implementing***Grades K-5**

GCPS meets regularly with stakeholders to ensure representative groups understand MSDE and CCPSD initiatives, including Blueprint and SoR-related topics.

GCPS instituted the following initiatives in the implementation of its literacy plan:

- One School One Book program that provides the same book for each family
- Computer Take Home Read Program in which read with the principal in a Google space

Additionally, a community school specialist at a community-based school is developing a needs-based assessment for the parents and the community. Another school partnered with the local library to read the classics, allowing the students to earn prizes.

However, while there is evidence of attempts to communicate with parents, focus groups reported a need for more community involvement.

Grades 6-12

The plan outlines specific actions and steps for all stakeholders to achieve the following goal: by the end of the 2026-2027 school year, 100% of schools will demonstrate an increase in parent satisfaction ratings based on the School Climate Survey results from the 2023-2024 school year.

Recommendations: Next Steps**1.0 Curriculum and Instruction****Grades K-5**

We recommend that ongoing support be implemented to ensure teachers understand data and how to supplement instruction based on data to meet children's needs. Additionally, we recommend that in-house support ensure fidelity to the curriculum.

Grades 6-12

To enhance the literacy plan for grades 6-8, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension is recommended, as ongoing reinforcement can benefit struggling readers. Additionally, clarity is needed on whether the equity plan is separate from the literacy plan, particularly in ensuring support for all students, including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and historically marginalized groups. The

framework that guided the creation of the plan's guidelines should also be specified. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to provide teachers in grades 6-12 with detailed guidance on evidence-aligned instructional practices, including scaffolded instruction, explicit vocabulary teaching, and strategies for writing and reading across content areas.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

We recommend that GCPS provide additional training on differentiated instruction to accommodate different learners in the same classroom. Additionally, we recommend that the district discuss plans to maintain the current level of coaching and professional development in the future, given funding concerns, the sustainability of the literacy coach positions, and long-term plans for evidence-based professional learning and coaching.

Grades 6-12

Teachers are advised to adhere to a protocol that includes the following inquiry: Was the pacing or intensity of instruction adjusted or increased? It is important to consider what training teaching and support staff receive to enhance and intensify instruction. Additionally, clarification is needed regarding the explicit updates that will be implemented, the support provided to individuals delivering academic interventions and content teachers, and how these considerations specifically apply to teachers and interventionists at the secondary level.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

Provide ongoing support for Tier 2 instruction for the classroom teachers who lead Tier 2 interventions.

What processes are in place for moving students in and out of small groups? It is unclear if a data protocol is used and if staff understand how to use the information to make decisions regarding students working at grade level. Teachers reported using more subjective judgments about groups rather than a specific data protocol to guide the process. Teachers rely on “observations” as opposed to specific checklists.

There should have been a discussion about the Universal Design of Learning (UDL). Consider providing training to help ensure teachers feel knowledgeable and empowered to supplement curriculum use with varying instructional materials and strategies to ensure engagement from varying populations of readers.

Grades 6-12

Feedback on whether the protocol is differentiated specifically for the secondary level is needed. Providing detailed information on what Tier 1 instruction entails for secondary education would be beneficial. While the data protocol is established at the individual level, clarification is required on how this process is applied during data meetings for the collective at the secondary level. Additionally, more information should be included about the group sizes, timing, and methods employed in Tier II instruction, as the current document lacks specifics on group size and the duration of interventions.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5

Administrators see the literacy work as aligned with coaches and teachers. However, there was a lack of clarity about additional ways of supporting the rollout and sustainability of evidence-based practices in their schools beyond using coaches.

We recommend that GCPS establish a network for school leadership and consider establishing professional learning communities with other similar school systems to explore creative management systems that administrators have put in place to ensure administrators are involved with this work while also supporting students through the creative use of personnel and funding.

Additionally, we recommend that the district share the learning walk protocol with teachers, the expectations for those visits, and a potential calendar.

We recommend that the district provide explicit instruction regarding administrators' expectations regarding data-based instructional decisions, helping teachers understand data, helping parents become more knowledgeable about school-based efforts, and other leadership expectations.

Grades 6-12

Feedback is necessary to establish time-bound action steps that create short—and mid-term goals within the plan. Additionally, an early warning system would be beneficial. Clarifying how the plan balances current initiatives with staff input is important. Furthermore, ensure that the redesign of walkthrough tools incorporates the established guidelines.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5

We recommend that GCPS consider creating an action plan, which could be included in the SIT and Title I plans and focus on structured literacy.

Additionally, we recommend the district provide training on infusing students' knowledge into the curriculum. This requires knowledge about students' homes and communities and the history of the communities surrounding the school.

We recommend that the district consider intentional school collaborations and professional learning communities, where schools explore and discuss successful plans resulting in greater community buy-in for literacy-based initiatives.

Grades 6-12

Feedback is needed to clarify how these initiatives specifically apply to the secondary level. It would be beneficial to include suggested frequencies for family engagement activities. Additionally, the specific measures implemented at the secondary level to support families must be identified.

