



LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Harford 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 practical 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 Harford 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 Harford 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. A total of 25 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. Twenty-three 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 and lasted for either 20 or 25 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

LEA Background and Context

The Harford County Public School District (HCPS) has a literacy mission “to provide a structured literacy program based on the Science of Reading and recognizes the authentic relationships among reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the real world.” HCPS utilized the MILE Framework in revising the Comprehensive Literacy Plan to effectively demonstrate the state of implementation for literacy instruction. The district is piloting a new curriculum (Benchmark) in 10 schools. The ten schools in the pilot volunteered to participate. Schools that have opted out of the Benchmark pilot are utilizing Lucy Calkins' Units of Study (updated with phonics). Schools observed during site visits were all Benchmark pilot schools.

The findings from the HCPS literacy plan review highlight several strengths and areas for improvement across various domains regarding the embrace and enactment of evidence-based literacy practices. For Curriculum and Instruction, implementing the Benchmark curriculum in pilot schools has garnered strong support from teachers, support staff, and administrators. This alignment has led to a shared language that simplifies the tracking of student progress and enhances engagement. Students across these schools are working on consistent curriculum content, albeit at different levels, which has resulted in increased participation and a heightened focus on comprehension and text analysis.

Regarding professional learning and support systems, the Benchmark curriculum has been favored over previous materials due to its emphasis on phonological and phonemic awareness, positively affecting student confidence and performance. For Professional Development, Title I funds have supported targeted training for some staff, while reading specialists contribute additional structured literacy training.

Regarding MTSS, schools benefit from various instructional materials and participate in iReady pilots, with regular data review meetings and intervention blocks ensuring tailored support for students. Instructional leadership is strengthened through consistent performance monitoring and SPA planning, supported by Benchmark, which focuses on continuous improvement and targeted assistance for students needing extra help. Community engagement is fostered through literacy programs and family resources, which help bridge school and home efforts in supporting student literacy development.

The district was evaluated according to the [EPIS Framework](#), which evaluates the system-wide implementation of evidence-based practices according to stages of Exploration, Adoption/Preparation, Implementation, and Sustainment. 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. *Based upon the Comprehensive Literacy Plan*, the reviewers identified HCPS in the **Pre-implementation** phase for Curriculum & Instruction, given the recent adoption of new materials as the district has modified its approach and is in **Early Implementation** for Professional Development and Multi-Tiered System of Support and **Sustainment** for Instructional Leadership and Community, Culture and Engagement.

Secondary

The district implements high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) across PreK-12 education, utilizing a diversity and equity tool for curriculum auditing restricted to district personnel. In grades 6-12, the curriculum features diverse literature and emphasizes direct instruction aligned with Maryland College and Career-Ready (MCCR) standards, incorporating scaffolds for differentiation.



Monthly Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings support data-driven instructional planning, while literacy specialists focus on engaging parents and building community partnerships in three priority middle schools. Beginning in the 2024-25 school year, the district will introduce new language arts scheduling and assessments to enhance targeted instruction, particularly for English Learners and students with disabilities.

HCPS has done a great deal of work to align their instruction with evidence-based practices over the 2023-24 school year. This coming year will prove pivotal as those structures and practices are refined and fortified. Data monitoring and feedback will be critical to success in this endeavor.

Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Implementation Status: Preparation

Grades K-5

Benchmark pilot schools have strong support from teachers, support staff, and administrators who are enthusiastic about the curriculum. A shared language among educators and families has facilitated more accessible assessment and tracking of student growth. Despite varying student ability levels, all students engage with the same curriculum, leading to increased engagement and participation. The curriculum emphasizes comprehension and text analysis, offering numerous opportunities for students to discuss and deepen their understanding.

During classroom visits, there was high consistency across classrooms and grade levels. However, there was minimal observation of direct, explicit instruction in the writing process.

Teachers and principals highlighted an initiative to find more culturally relevant texts in the material to ensure students can access content and characters they connect with.

Grades 6-12

The district systematically implements high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) across PreK-12 education and utilizes a diversity and equity tool for curriculum auditing, though access is restricted to district personnel. The curriculum includes literature that represents diverse cultures, and the strategic plan emphasizes direct instruction in grades 6-12 aligned with Maryland College and Career-Ready (MCCR) standards, incorporating scaffolds for instructional differentiation. Additionally, the district has established support structures for English Learners (ELs) and employs the HMH Secondary English Program, which includes vocabulary instruction and studies in word awareness. Instructional practices involve "close reading" techniques using informational and narrative texts to enhance comprehension.

2.0 Professional Learning

Implementation Status: Preparation

Grades K-5

According to the literacy plan, a combination of LETRS, SIPPS, and Really Great Reading (RGR) training (presumably on broadly structured literacy practices) was provided for teachers. RGR for all PK-K and 1-3 teachers. LETRS for a cohort of 40 teachers. The district has made it a priority to meet the diverse needs of all learners in professional learning. This includes scaffolds for ELL/ML students and piloting a new dual-language program. Particular details were not readily available in the literacy plan, including support for adjusting the time and intensity of instruction.

In observed schools, the Benchmark curriculum is favored over the previous Units of Study for its strong focus on phonological and phonemic awareness, which has improved student confidence and performance. Title I funds have supported training for a limited number of staff in OG+ and LETRS in observed schools. The training has been described as voluntary

and contingent upon available funding.

Teachers reported that reading specialists have provided additional support and hands-on training in structured literacy practices. This has been particularly true in schools piloting the Benchmark curriculum.

Grades 6-12

The district reports that its secondary English departments conduct monthly Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings on data reviews and instructional planning. Reading specialists collaborate with grade-level teams during these monthly PLCs to address pacing and instructional intensity. At the same time, content leaders at the secondary level utilize formative data to inform instructional planning. For the 2024-25 school year, grades 6-10 will implement the iReady assessment to better target instruction. Furthermore, the district's professional development plan is developed with Special Education, English Learner (EL), and Title I offices. It includes funding for three literacy specialist positions in high-needs middle schools. Professional learning initiatives provided by reading specialists specifically target multilingual learners and students with disabilities, with additional training from Really Great Reading focused on supporting ELs. The professional development for secondary English teachers has been collaboratively developed with the Office of English Language Learners and the Office of Equity and Cultural Proficiency, addressing topics such as equitable grading, bias and stereotypes, and support strategies for ELs.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Implementation Status: Early Implementation

Grades K-5

According to the literacy plan, the district utilizes DIBELS in K-3, assessing all kindergarten students three times a year. Those identified as at-risk are progress monitored monthly in grades 1-3.

In MTSS, it was observed that schools could access Tier II instructional materials, including OG+, SIPPS, Foundations, iStation, and Heggerty. Some schools are also involved in an iReady pilot. HCPS engages in monthly data dialogue meetings with administrators, teachers, and literacy specialists to review student literacy data. Additionally, schools schedule dedicated intervention blocks to offer tailored support from teachers, special educators, and reading specialists based on individual student needs.

Grades 6-12

The district's goal focuses on developing strong foundational reading skills, emphasizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles encompassing engagement, representation, and action/expression. The Office of Accountability has created data protocol sheets and assessment spreadsheets to facilitate students' transition from 5th to 6th and from 8th to 9th grades. Beginning in the 2024-25 school year, middle schools will implement two 45-minute periods dedicated to language arts—one for reading and one for writing—while high school students receive English instruction during a 90-minute block every other day, allowing for targeted small group instruction. Students in grades 6-10 will be identified for Tier II instruction based on reading data from county and state assessments, with intervention time

and intensity aligned to the guidelines of the respective programs, including DreamBox, Reading Plus, HMH Read 180, and Strategic Reading.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Implementation Status: Don't Know

Grades K-5

Although not addressed in the literacy plan, performance monitoring for schools and the district occurs at least three times a year using DIBELS for all kindergarten students and selected students in grades 1-3. This process involves consistently using School Performance Achievement (SPA) plans and data dialogue meetings, with Benchmark providing a common language for these activities. SPA planning is conducted with vertical teacher teams to develop action plans for continuous improvement. Data analysis in the fall, winter, and spring focuses on targeting and supporting students who need additional help based on the SPA plan.

Grades 6-12

The district has outlined general guidelines for its initiatives, including a link to the School Improvement Plan (SPA). A description of the professional development calendar has been provided, alongside the implementation of instructional writing walkthroughs in middle schools. Although links to the middle school writing walkthrough form and IDA Standards are included, access remains restricted to district personnel. Furthermore, literacy specialists at three priority middle schools are actively working to engage parents and build community partnerships.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Implementation Status: Don't Know

Grades K-5

Although not addressed in the literacy plan, discussions with teachers and administrators suggested that schools implement various literacy programs and initiatives, including One School, One Book, Family Reading Night, Learn With Me Days, and Secret Readers. Schools using the Benchmark curriculum also distribute resources like family connection letters and booklet activities to support literacy development at home.

Grades 6-12

The district has provided a general overview indicating that literacy specialists at three priority middle schools actively engage with parents to foster community partnerships. Additionally, a link is included to feedback and reactions from an event held at one of these schools.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

Recommendations for curriculum and instruction include addressing inconsistent implementation of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading across schools. Units of Study include limited phonics instruction only in primary grades (K-2), with no phonics in intermediate grades (3-5). In schools using Benchmark, Structured Literacy is often viewed as an intervention rather than a core instructional strategy. Structured Literacy primarily focuses on Special Education for schools with Units of Study. There is a need for differentiation in instruction for diverse student populations, with few to no scaffolds observed for English Language (EL) and Multilingual Learner (MLL) students. Additionally, teachers need more culturally diverse texts and must proactively seek out such materials beyond the provided curriculum.

Because Benchmark, Heggerty, and Units of Study have a unique scope and sequence, integration and alignment may be challenging for teachers and ELA staff. Other districts have experienced these difficulties, and consulting with others facing these challenges is recommended.

Grades 6-12

The district should provide detailed information on implementing culturally responsive practices within its programs, including integrating bilingual and biliteracy initiatives in the Benchmark system. It is essential to assess whether equitable practices extend beyond outcome monitoring and systematically incorporate approaches such as trans-linguaging, diverse literature, and asset-focused instructional strategies that leverage community cultural knowledge. Additionally, the plan should specify how culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE) practices and materials are integrated at the beginning of each unit, alongside evidence-aligned learning principles embedded throughout instruction. Furthermore, explicit instruction on text structures and strategies should be outlined, including the supports and scaffolds designed to assist English Learners (ELs) and dialectal speakers, as well as guidance for vocabulary instruction in non-ELA content areas.

2.0 Professional Learning**Grades K-5**

Recommendations for professional learning include additional training and ongoing support in structured literacy. Two significant barriers were identified: insufficient funding and challenges in providing training for 10-month employees. Principals suggested that training administrators in structured literacy practices could enhance instructional expectations.

Grades 6-12

The district should clarify the provision of instructional coaching at the secondary level, as this information may be included in the linked plan, which was unavailable for review; thus, it should be integrated into the narrative within the evidence section. Additionally, the district needs to specify whether reading specialists collaborate with content specialists in grades 6-10 or if their focus is solely on elementary support. It is also important to confirm the presence of middle school literacy specialists and any plans to enhance capacity in middle and high schools. Furthermore, regarding the secondary-specific professional development outlined in

the plan, it would be advantageous to indicate whether the sessions included speakers proficient in the languages of the student population.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

Recommendations include implementing a universal progress monitoring system for grades K-3, with assessments for all students at the year's beginning, middle, and end. There is a need for a district-wide assessment and additional screening tools, as current practices include using iReady in some schools. Currently, only kindergarten students undergo these assessments. For students identified, the district might consider a protocol of progress monitoring every 6-9 weeks in conjunction with authentic assessments (“exit tickets”) to make determinations.

Observations strongly emphasize intervention in grades K-3, but students in grades 4-5 needing phonics support require additional assistance. There is a need to improve the alignment of Tier II training across classrooms, as reading specialists and special educators receive targeted literacy training, but general teachers still need to. Although Heggerty is listed as a district Tier II intervention resource, its implementation was not observed, and there needs to be more certainty about the associated training opportunities and staff expectations. Schools also face challenges with intervention capacity, requiring more trained staff and special educators due to high turnover and recruitment difficulties.

Grades 6-12

The district is encouraged to specify its strategy for conducting data meetings at the secondary level, ensuring that data protocols are clearly understood by teachers and support staff to consistently inform instructional adjustments. It should explore methods to increase access to Tier I core instruction for high school students, aiming for the recommended 90-120 minutes per day while clarifying whether differentiated instruction will be provided during Tier I. Additionally, details regarding the composition of Tier II interventions, including grouping size and the adaptation of intervention intensity based on progress monitoring data, are essential, along with an explanation of how Tier II aligns with Tier I instruction. Finally, the district should provide information on Tier III interventions, focusing on grouping size and how intervention strategies are regularly adjusted according to ongoing progress monitoring.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5

Recommendations include enhancing teacher capacity for implementing new Structured Literacy practices and programs. School leadership also requires training on the theory and practices of Structured Literacy to support staff better and strengthen literacy and family engagement strategies. Many schools need additional personnel to improve the effectiveness of these implementations. Careful allocation of resources is essential to ensure that school-based staff and administrators receive adequate training and ongoing support in Structured Literacy.

Grades 6-12

The district should clarify whether instructional walkthroughs are conducted at the secondary level in alignment with IDA's Knowledge and Practice Standards. It is also essential to ensure that all provided links are accessible to individuals outside the district and provide a detailed description of how secondary literacy is addressed within the district's initiatives.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5

Recommendations include leveraging HCPS's growing diversity by developing a strategic approach to culturally relevant instructional materials. Additionally, holding focus groups with administrators and the community can help gather input from educators, students, and families about the cultural assets present in HCPS.

Grades 6-12

The district should provide further details outlining strategies for community engagement through collaboration, specifically concerning literacy knowledge and the strengths and needs of families at the high school level. It is also important to indicate the frequency of these engagement events. The current general description and narrative evidence lack a specific focus on secondary education.