



LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Howard 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 Howard County Public Schools district 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 Howard 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. 13 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-six classroom observations were conducted in May 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

Howard County Public School District (HCPSS) embraces the mission: "Every student and staff member embraces diversity and possesses the skills, knowledge, and confidence to positively influence the larger community."

The findings from the HCPSS literacy plan review highlight several strengths and areas for improvement across various domains regarding the embrace and enactment of evidence-based literacy practices. HCPSS has adopted a district-wide approach to **Curriculum and Instruction**, utilizing explicit, systematic, and cumulative methods. The Into Reading and Being a Reader program, alongside *Heggerty* for phonemic awareness, ensures consistent and high-quality school instruction. This unified approach helps students engage with engaging texts and receive coherent phonemic training, supporting their overall literacy development. In **Professional Learning**, the district has invested in literacy coaches to provide hands-on, non-evaluative support, and most early primary teachers have undergone LETRS training to strengthen their literacy instruction. Strong collaboration between reading specialists and literacy coaches is evident in **Multi-Tiered Support Systems**, though the demand for these coaches often exceeds their available time. Regular progress monitoring and effective Tier II interventions are in place, supported by Orton-Gillingham training for specialists. **Instructional Leadership** plays a crucial role in setting rigorous standards and fostering a supportive culture, with successful leaders aligning practices with the diverse needs of their student body. **Community Engagement** remains strong, with programs like Literacy Nights and Parent/Teacher Conferences continuing despite pandemic challenges, emphasizing the importance of attendance and engagement in enhancing student performance.

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. 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 of the Comprehensive Literacy Plan identified HCPSS to be in a **planning phase** for Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Multi-Tiered Support Systems, Instructional Leadership, and Community, Culture, and Engagement. This is due to the future-looking nature of the plan in its current form. Given the significant **adoption and early implementation** observed, the district would be characterized in this transitional phase between planning and adoption to early implementation.

Secondary

The instructional materials outlined in the literacy plan are systematically aligned with the five core components, referencing the Equity Framework and High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM). Attendance and participation metrics for countywide professional development initiatives, including sessions for Instructional Team Leaders and New Teacher Orientation, are documented to assess engagement. The plan also highlights using CommonLit assessment data for grades 6-12 and MCAP data for grades 6-10, along with Amplify DIBELS tools for progress monitoring to inform instructional practices. Furthermore, establishing structured agendas, professional learning calendars, and data protocols within the School Improvement Plan (SIP) ensures comprehensive training and collaboration among educators. At the same time, Title I and Community Schools facilitate parent partnerships that enhance literacy development within the community.

Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Implementation Status: *Planning/Preparing*

Grades K-5

Although current implementation needs to be explicitly addressed in their plan, visits and feedback suggest that HCPSS has implemented a district-wide approach to explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction. Adopting the *Into Reading* and *Being a Reader* programs and *Heggerty* for phonemic awareness ensures high-quality, engaging texts and consistent phonemic instruction across the district. A robust equity framework and texts reflect diverse stories, and students were observed to be mainly in primary grades.

Classroom teachers were observed using the Heggerty teacher's manuals, following a scope and sequence from simple to more complex concepts, and modeling and releasing during instruction. However, implementation was inconsistent across schools as some teachers did not utilize the Heggerty curriculum or follow a scope and sequence. Another teacher was observed correcting students by providing the word for them instead of modeling or scaffolding them through decoding during a phonics lesson. Another teacher observed that encouraging students to use pictures was the only strategy to make sense of the text.

In terms of comprehension, classroom teachers were observed helping students dig deeper into texts by providing explicit instruction in responding to questions by using evidence from the text and building background knowledge. Students were observed being engaged as classroom teachers provided opportunities for evidence-based discussion building on speaking and listening skills and academic vocabulary. Some inconsistencies across schools and classrooms were observed as opportunities to build background knowledge of topics or engage in word learning strategies were missed.

In focus groups, intermediate-grade teachers shared that the Into Reading program used in their grade levels (3rd-5th) contains little phonics or structured literacy. To fill in the instructional gaps, cohorts of teachers are building their own phonics PD for intermediate-level teachers.

Grades 6-12

The instructional materials are enumerated, and the corresponding measures are aligned with the five core components. The Equity Framework and High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) are referenced. Additionally, attendance and participation in countywide professional development and professional development for Instructional Team Leaders are noted. The document also includes references to curriculum writing, CommonLit assessment data for grades 6-12, and MCAP data for grades 6-10.

2.0 Professional Learning

Implementation Status: *Planning/Preparing*

Grades K-5

Although implementation has yet to be explicitly addressed in their plan, visits, and feedback, HCPSS has invested significantly in literacy coaches to enhance teacher training and student support, with coaches providing non-evaluative, hands-on professional learning on literacy strategies and resources. Most early primary teachers have received LETRS training, strengthening their understanding of the Science of Reading. Schools offer additional, tailored training based on their specific needs, such as SEL and equity, and have access to literacy coaches for ongoing support. Despite these efforts, LETRS training remains voluntary, and scheduling issues persist, compounded by the absence of a district-employed LETRS trainer for continuous support. School administrators and district staff would like to expand the number of teachers and support staff trained in structured literacy, but funds are limited.

Grades 6-12

The Professional Learning Feedback Survey aims to gather insights on the effectiveness of professional development initiatives. The Literacy Coach Professional Development Plan and calendar are designed for elementary education. At the same time, the On Track College and Career Ready (CCR) framework provides implementation guidance focused on monitoring CCR pathways at the secondary level. The countywide professional learning initiatives include a New Teacher Orientation and self-paced modules, with materials systematically inventoried at each educational level. At the secondary level, attendance tracking for countywide professional learning sessions, particularly for English Language Development (ELD), is also implemented to assess engagement and participation.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Implementation Status: *Planning/Preparing*

Grades K-5

Although current implementation needs to be explicitly addressed in their plan, visits, and feedback suggest that collaboration between reading specialists and literacy coaches is strong across district and school levels, with literacy coaches playing a crucial role in each school community. Teachers shared their trust in the literacy coaches in focus groups and said they are non-punitive and non-evaluative. Principals have highlighted that the demand for literacy coaches often exceeds their allocated time. Students undergo regular progress monitoring, and there is active communication and collaboration among teachers and reading support staff regarding student data. Reading specialists are trained in Orton-Gillingham to deliver Tier II interventions effectively.

Grades 6-12

The literacy plan emphasizes using Amplify DIBELS progress monitoring tools to assess student progress and align with intervention materials effectively. It incorporates a comprehensive professional development plan that supports team planning and includes formal and informal walkthroughs to foster educator collaboration. Data protocols established in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) facilitate systematic analysis of progress. Additionally, the completion and use of the Synergy database by reading specialists, interventionists, and special educators play a critical role in tracking student outcomes and enhancing instructional practices.

<p>4.0 Instructional Leadership</p>	<p>Implementation Status: <i>Planning/Preparing</i></p>
<p>Grades K-5</p> <p>Although current implementation is not explicitly addressed in their plan, visits and feedback, suggest that some leaders are particularly successful in aligning teaching practices with the cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity of their student body and providing access to varied instructional materials. These leaders utilize regular school meetings and professional learning sessions to discuss goals and track progress. Schools with strong instructional visions and clear communication of goals demonstrate effective continuous improvement. Administrators are empowered to tailor professional development to the specific needs of their staff, which enhances buy-in and supports differentiated approaches across schools.</p> <p>Grades 6-12</p> <p>The literacy plan identifies several key initiatives aimed at enhancing instructional practices. These include the establishment of agendas and a professional learning calendar to organize training sessions effectively. The Administrator Curriculum and Instruction (ACI) offers training in the science of reading, aligned with the Danielson framework and ELA walkthroughs. Additionally, Administrator Lunch and Learn sessions consist of five one-hour sessions designed to foster professional development. The plan also incorporates an assessment calendar, School Improvement Plan (SIP) data protocols, walkthrough tools, and content-specific meetings with curriculum offices to ensure alignment and support across all educational initiatives.</p>	
<p>5.0 Community Culture and Engagement</p>	<p>Implementation Status: <i>Planning/Preparing</i></p>
<p>Grades K-5</p> <p>Although current implementation is not explicitly addressed in their plan, visits, and feedback suggest that teachers supporting one another is strongly emphasized, fostering a sense of community and collaboration to enhance student success. Despite challenges posed by the pandemic, programs and initiatives such as Literacy Nights, Parent/Teacher Conferences, and library field trips continue to be widely used across the county. Both administrators and teachers recognize the critical role of student attendance and engagement in improving academic outcomes, with principals underscoring the need to strengthen attendance efforts in conjunction with efforts to boost student performance.</p> <p>Grades 6-12</p> <p>Analyzing school culture data is essential for understanding the environment in which literacy initiatives are implemented. The agendas and minutes from the Language Arts Advisory Committee provide critical insights into discussions and decisions impacting literacy instruction. Title I and Community Schools actively facilitate parent partnership opportunities focused on literacy, fostering engagement and collaboration. Additionally, the availability of family and community ELA resources further supports the development of literacy skills outside the classroom.</p>	

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

HCPSS needs explicit phonics instruction for intermediate grades to address upper elementary students needing foundational literacy support. Observations revealed inconsistent phonics instruction and intervention across schools. Additional professional development is needed to help teachers effectively teach independent word-learning strategies to struggling students. Additionally, the district and schools have an opportunity to increase instructional reading time, which would enhance small-group reading and support more effective literacy instruction.

Grades 6-12

Specifying the instructional materials designated for each grade band from K-8 would be beneficial. Furthermore, a clear outline of the curriculum's scope and sequence and its vertical and horizontal alignment across grades should be provided. Consider how the equity framework is integrated into the curriculum and identify the stakeholders involved in this adaptation. It is also essential to outline the quality control systems in place to ensure the effectiveness of these adaptations. A detailed scope and sequence for professional development should be included, highlighting its relevance to vocabulary instruction. Assessments should be examined for their role in supporting specific educational indicators. Expanding the existing table to encompass "indicators" and "measures" and a comprehensive implementation plan for these indicators would be advantageous. It is important to analyze how these assessments guide curriculum development, particularly in close reading of complex texts and applying various strategies.

Moreover, clarification is needed regarding which curriculum grades are being developed and by whom. Although the "Being a Writer" curriculum is included, it is pertinent to note its limited applicability to secondary grades. Addressing these aspects will strengthen the overall plan.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

LETRS training, though available to HCPSS teachers, is voluntary and inconsistent across schools, leading to uneven literacy instruction. Teachers who have completed LETRS training demonstrate stronger literacy instruction skills, especially in phonics, than those who have not. The training provided by external facilitators needs more availability and consistent scheduling. Additionally, literacy coaches, crucial for supporting school leaders and teachers with hands-on classroom support and professional development, are in high demand but are constrained by budget limitations and time availability. This high demand for coaches further exacerbates their limited presence in schools.

Professional development components include a professional learning feedback survey to assess the effectiveness of initiatives, alongside a literacy coach professional development plan/calendar specifically for elementary educators. Additionally, the on track college and career ready (CCR) framework, with its associated implementation guidance for monitoring pathways at the secondary level, aims to ensure students meet readiness criteria for post-secondary success. Countywide professional learning initiatives, such as New Teacher Orientation and self-paced modules, further enhance educator development and support student readiness.

The plan should include explicit instructions on how the proposed measures will facilitate the authentic use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to support the overall literacy vision, along with a clear scope and sequence of professional development that connects to the adjustment of instruction time and intensity. New teacher orientation and self-paced modules must effectively address relevant indicators. At the same time, strategies for equitable resource distribution should be established and supported by specific measures that align with professional learning initiatives. Providing detailed information about professional learning opportunities is crucial, particularly regarding scaffolding for historically underserved groups. Additionally, the current methods of observation and feedback for those delivering academic interventions should be evaluated to enhance their effectiveness.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

Teacher training needs to be improved to analyze literacy data more effectively. Progress monitoring discussions are often informal and need more structured guidance to help teachers interpret data and adjust instruction. Additionally, intermediate-grade students have significant foundational literacy needs, and expanding the criteria for additional support is desired to address these needs more comprehensively.

Grades 6-12

The plan could clarify how interventionists utilize the Synergy database to enhance instructional practices. It is advisable to outline the walkthrough framework, providing more detailed evidence for the observations conducted. Consider specifying how data will be disaggregated to inform instructional decisions better. Additionally, it is important to describe the mechanisms in place to ensure that students receive a high-quality, evidence-aligned Tier III program at the secondary level, including predetermined entrance and exit criteria. Further specificity regarding the structure of interventions delivered by reading interventionists, specialists, and special educators would enhance understanding. Lastly, a more comprehensive description of how Synergy is employed at the secondary level to support students with literacy needs is recommended.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-12

When school leadership is aligned with district initiatives, it results in consistent implementation. There is an opportunity to enhance leadership training, monitoring, and commitment to district-wide initiatives. Administrators have also indicated a need for more comprehensive district-led professional development on structured literacy. Additionally, implementing cross-district support systems could facilitate the sharing of best practices for phonics instruction and other initiatives among teachers, staff, and administrators.

The evidence must clearly outline how the goals will be documented and shared with relevant stakeholders. The calendar should be structured to support the full and strategic implementation of the current district initiative for all educators and leaders at the secondary level. District leadership must monitor school and district performance to identify trends among disaggregated student populations at least three times a year. It is important to provide detailed information about the walkthrough tools or include a link to them to demonstrate their alignment with IDA's Knowledge and Practice Standards. Additionally, the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and content-specific meetings with curriculum offices will ensure that instructional leaders are accountable for identifying, monitoring, and addressing barriers to student success.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-12

To enhance community involvement, schools should explore additional methods to engage with parents, family members, and other stakeholders to understand how their participation could be most beneficial. Implementing their suggestions can boost community buy-in, thereby strengthening school initiatives. Additionally, there is an opportunity for district-wide support to collaborate with the local library network to enrich these community connections further.

The methods for gathering cultural data at the secondary level must be clearly defined to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the school environment. Systems should be established at the individual, grade, building, and district levels to monitor fidelity and sustain key initiatives effectively. Partnerships are instrumental in facilitating collaboration around literacy knowledge at the secondary level, contributing to the establishment of trust with community partners. It would be beneficial to provide more detail or a link to the measures used for assessing school culture data, illustrating how this information is reviewed and integrated to support key initiatives.