



LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Montgomery 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.

Montgomery 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 Montgomery 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 24 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. Fifty-eight classroom observations were conducted in April and May 2024 across 13 schools 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 35-minute classroom observations using a standard observation protocol. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.



LEA Background and Context

The Montgomery County Public School District (MCPS) works to implement a vision: “By addressing the diverse needs of students and engaging families and communities, we aim to cultivate a culture of literacy that empowers students to succeed academically and thrive in the 21st century. MCPS has moved toward evidence-based literacy practices following the 2018-19 school year when they began to pilot new curricular approaches in several elementary schools.

MCPS has seen a 15% increase in 3rd-grade MCAP scores since 2020-21, when about 57.9% of students were reading proficiently at grade level to 71.7% in 2021-22 and 73.4% in 2022-23. The district aims to increase overall performance to 82% in the recent term and to 90% in the coming school year while ensuring that “gaps” for historically marginalized groups continue to close through targeted support.

The findings from the MCPS literacy plan review highlight several strengths and areas for improvement across various domains regarding the embrace and enactment of evidence-based literacy practices. Regarding **Curriculum and Instruction**, The district has recently adopted a new comprehensive literacy curriculum (CKLA) for grades K-5, beginning SY 24-25. It is seen positively by teachers familiar with structured literacy, who expect it to enhance word recognition. Two-thirds of educators are well-versed in the Science of Reading framework, having received relevant training. Interventions aligned with this framework are in place across most schools, supporting various tiers of instruction. **Professional learning** initiatives include comprehensive training for K-2 teachers on the Science of Reading, with additional programs such as RGR, UFLI, LETRS, and IMSE Orton-Gillingham training provided to staff as needed.

Regarding **Multi-tiered Support Systems**, DIBELS is now administered universally in grades K-2, replacing MCLASS, and is also used for grades 3-5 in some schools. Progress monitoring has improved with more frequent checks for students below benchmarks. Screening data helps group students for Tier 2 interventions, and many schools employ trained early literacy paraeducators for additional support. Schools are also encouraged to use flexible scheduling blocks to integrate targeted instruction and interventions.

Community engagement efforts include informative meetings and workshops for parents and collaboration with the Black and Brown Coalition on early alert systems, with some schools adapting their approach to accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds and support literacy development.

The K-5 district efforts were 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 on the details provided in the Comprehensive Literacy Plan, the reviewers identified MCPS as being in the mode of **adoption/early implementation** around the key drivers of Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Instructional Leadership, and **planning** for Multi-tiered Support Systems, Community Culture, and

Engagement. This is partly due to the plan's forward-looking nature and the implementation of the new curriculum. Based upon observations in the classroom and focus group reports, MCPS is in a transitional phase in all of these key indicators between ***planning and early implementation***, where some structures are in place, from professional learning to assessments and intervention programs. Yet, others are being developed, from the curriculum rollout to data protocols and early alert systems for families from historically marginalized communities. There is variability in implementation and buy-in between schools, grade levels, and classrooms, which will be critical to address moving forward.

Secondary

In 2019, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) implemented the McGraw Hill StudySync curriculum for grades 6-8, emphasizing explicit literacy instruction and disciplinary literacy practices alongside the GLEAM approach to enhance secondary literacy outcomes. Revisions to the grades 9-12 curriculum aim to improve text set quality and focus on explicit close reading instruction, emphasizing vocabulary and writing strategies across content areas while also targeting the professional development of educators working with English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities. The literacy plan further delineates roles for central and school-based administration, incorporates parental engagement initiatives, and addresses the specific needs of English as a Multi-Language (EML) students by integrating their linguistic backgrounds into instructional practices.

Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

K- 5 Implementation Status: *Early Implementation*

Grades K-5

Before 2022, MCPS utilized Benchmark Advanced for K-5 for all components of reading. This program came under intense scrutiny (nationally) for its weaknesses in foundational skills. In the 2022-23 school year, MCPS implemented multiple programs for foundational skills in K-2, including Really Great Reading (RGR since 2021-22), UFLI, and Orton-Gillingham (dependent on teachers receiving IMSE training), and have utilized Benchmark Advanced for comprehension in K-2 and overall in 3-5. Starting the school year 2024-25, a new fully integrated curriculum, CKLA, will be implemented for grades K-5, complementing existing K-2 curricula used for word recognition during Tier 1. Teachers knowledgeable about structured literacy view CKLA positively and anticipate it will enhance their current practices. About two-thirds of educators, including lead teachers and paraeducators, are familiar with the Science of Reading framework and have received relevant training. There is some concern about initiative fatigue and the challenges of moving to another new curriculum (the third literacy curriculum in roughly 10 years), even among enthusiastic teachers.

MCPS has multiple dual-language and two-way immersion programs for emergent Multilingual Learners (MLs or EMLs), one of which was observed using structured literacy programs and Benchmark’s Spanish language program.

Observations indicated that Tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions based on the Science of Reading are utilized in most schools. However, based on focus group reports, the ability to adapt and differentiate differs between schools and teachers based on knowledge and adeptness with the structured literacy materials. More skilled teachers tend to differentiate based on learner needs. In contrast, less skilled teachers will stick to the Benchmark curriculum or structured literacy script without the ability to return to earlier skills or advance, which can stem from the school culture.

Grades 6-12

In 2019, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) adopted the McGraw Hill StudySync English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum for grades 6-8, which prioritizes explicit literacy instruction within content areas and incorporates disciplinary literacy practices. At the secondary level, the GLEAM approach from UnboundEd, in conjunction with StudySync, is employed to enhance literacy outcomes. The revisions to the curriculum for grades 9-12 aim to improve the quality of text sets and increase the focus on explicit instruction in close reading skills. Furthermore, vocabulary is identified as a critical element of a structured literacy approach, necessitating targeted instruction. The rationale for these changes also emphasizes the significance of teaching writing strategies across content areas at the secondary level.

2.0 Professional

K-5 Implementation Status: *Early Implementation*

Learning	
<p>Grades K-5</p> <p>According to the literacy plan, all K-2 teachers receive training on the Science of Reading to enhance their understanding. Relevant educators, including early literacy paraeducators, are also taught specific programs like RGR and UFLI. LETRS training is offered to elementary teachers, and selected staff receive 30 hours of IMSE Orton-Gillingham training. Additionally, school staff, particularly reading specialists, deliver ongoing structured literacy training using materials provided by MCPS to build on summer Science of Reading training.</p> <p>Reports from teachers in focus groups indicate that staff in K-2 are trained and aware of foundational skills and structured literacy practices. Still, general education teachers in 3-5 tend to have balanced literacy backgrounds and less exposure to structured literacy through professional learning. Teachers in 3-5 have also expressed difficulty implementing structured literacy practices in the context of the (Benchmark) curriculum that is not aligned, but having students who are missing these skills.</p> <p>Several teachers reported participating in structured literacy training delivered by school staff (though at different frequencies), particularly training from reading specialists using materials provided by MCPS to follow up on its summer SOR training. Otherwise, school-based professional development varies considerably from school to school, from ongoing, structured, and aligned to minimal, intermittent, and ad hoc.</p> <p>Focus groups reported that all elementary leadership teams were trained to work with multilingual learners. This led to shared responsibility for teaching MLs and greater collaboration and co-planning with ELD teachers. However, other teachers responded that this is “easier said than done” and that minimal common planning time and effort was provided, depending on the school.</p> <p>Grades 6-12</p> <p>Emerging evidence indicates that professional development initiatives specifically targeting teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs), students with disabilities, and content area educators in middle school are being implemented. Middle school content teachers receive training in evidence-based literacy strategies, known as PACT practices. Additionally, they benefit from collaborative coaching to implement these literacy interventions. Ongoing professional development and coaching are also provided to improve Tier 2 instructional methodologies for Foundational Literacy Paraeducators.</p>	
3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems	K-5 Implementation Status: <i>Planning</i>
<p>Grades K-5</p> <p>Universal screeners have been updated, with DIBELS now administered three times a year for all K-2 students, replacing the previous mCLASS system. Lectura is also used for Spanish-speaking students in two-way immersion programs. For grades 3-5, MAP is administered three times a year, with some schools also using DIBELS. Progress monitoring</p>	

has been standardized, with more frequent checks for students scoring below benchmarks. Many schools use screening data to form small groups for Tier 2 interventions, and early literacy paraeducators are trained to deliver UFLI when Tier 1 interventions are insufficient. Additionally, schools are encouraged to use flexible scheduling blocks for targeted instruction and interventions to avoid disrupting Tier 1 instruction. However, interventionists report that at some schools, no intervention block leads them to pull students from core instruction.

Grades 6-12

MCPS uses the MAP Growth assessment for grades 3-9, a computer-adaptive evaluation designed to inform instructional strategies and identify students' subsequent steps in reading comprehension. Secondary-level students may be recommended for intervention courses targeting phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills. Schools receive guidance on interpreting student data individually to ensure that interventions appropriately align with each student's needs and exit interventions promptly when ready. Tier II support temporarily intensifies the core English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. In contrast, Tier III interventions are delivered through a dedicated class period incorporated into the student's daily schedule and the standard grade-level ELA course.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

K-12 Implementation Status: *Early Implementation*

Grades K-5

Central office ELA staff actively address school-based implementation issues, taking responsibility and responding to questions and barriers as they arise. Teachers noted that ELA staff have mediated conflicts among school staff regarding implementation challenges. The literacy plan outlines the roles and responsibilities of central administration offices and school-based administration in implementing aspects.

Grades 6-12

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

K-12 Implementation Status: *Planning*

Grades K-5

Many schools have engaged parents in supporting the shift to structured literacy through various meetings and events, including back-to-school nights, PTA meetings, reading nights, and workshops. Additionally, some schools have tried to address the literacy needs of EML (English as a Multi-Language) students by incorporating knowledge of their native languages and dialects into instruction, using diverse vocabulary, and communicating with parents via robocalls.

Grades 6-12

It is essential to clearly delineate and address the specific components of the secondary plan, ensuring that they are distinct from those of the K-5 plan. This differentiation will facilitate

targeted interventions and strategies that cater to the unique needs of secondary students, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the educational framework.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

Teachers need increased planning time to analyze student data collectively to address curricular gaps and misalignments. Enhanced support is also required for Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs) and for teachers to use their professional judgment to adapt curricula to meet student needs better. Additionally, there are calls to address gaps and misalignments in curricula across other subjects, such as social studies and biliteracy frameworks, and to manage teacher fatigue associated with implementing new curricula and addressing these issues from a structured literacy perspective.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is dedicated to fostering the success of Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs). To support this goal, classroom teachers are encouraged to create culturally responsive environments by incorporating trade books and utilizing the Amplify Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Social Justice Guide.

Grades 6-12

All curricular materials must align with evidence-based practices and incorporate a culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE) framework. Muhammad (2023) identifies four essential components of this framework: building identity, teaching skills, developing intellectualism through applying knowledge, and fostering criticality. It is crucial to ensure that these components, or those pertinent to the adopted framework, are effectively integrated into the curriculum. Furthermore, teachers must receive training on the framework and the associated literacy practices.

The curriculum should encompass the five core components of literacy instruction and ensure that explicit instruction in word recognition, word awareness, and morphological awareness continues at the secondary level, extending beyond grade 5. A comprehensive description of explicit instruction in text structure for informational and narrative texts should also be included. Appropriate scaffolding strategies for writing should also be articulated to support struggling and multilingual learners. Lastly, the district should outline how it will integrate reading and writing instruction with content area learning.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

The uptake of LETRS training among eligible teachers varies significantly. At one school, nearly all staff have completed LETRS 1 and are progressing to LETRS 2, while six schools report that only a few teachers have finished LETRS 1, and one school has yet to participate. Some teachers, such as ELD teachers, have been excluded from LETRS based on their positions. Professional development quality and implementation differ between schools, with notable gaps in teachers' confidence and knowledge in supporting Emergent Multilingual Learners (EMLs), especially in language development for comprehension. The adoption of CKLA has influenced how receptive teachers are to applying LETRS training. Successful schoolwide campaigns have improved some schools' staff understanding of the Science of Reading. To enhance training effectiveness, increased support through tools like PLCs, coaching, and team collaboration is recommended to help translate training into practice.

MCPS has established an annual series for the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years to support educators, which includes LETRS Training, Support for SLIFe Students (specialized language needs), a yearly calendar outlining various professional learning opportunities, including a dedicated series for Reading Specialists in 2024-2025, job-embedded learning for Reading Specialists, and structured literacy best practices have been developed to enhance word recognition for students in Grades 3-5.

Grades 6-12

It is imperative to increase the utilization of PLCs to foster sustainability in training and professional development efforts. Conduct lesson studies at least once per quarter to reinforce ongoing professional learning and ensure sustainability in instructional practices. To address disparities, provide greater transparency regarding the equitable distribution of resources at the secondary level. Develop and integrate specific professional learning opportunities that focus on the needs of historically underserved student populations. Establish differentiated methods for providing teacher feedback at the secondary level to support diverse instructional practices better and enhance educator effectiveness.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

The effectiveness of Tier 2 interventions varies, with some schools revisiting intervention groupings regularly while others keep them static. Access to Tier 2 support needs to be more consistent, influenced by factors such as grade level, staffing, and the presence of an intervention block. Some schools need help to accommodate all eligible students, and in a few cases, Tier 2 interventions are primarily handled by classroom teachers during insufficiently timed ELA blocks.

Data meetings and protocols lack consistency across schools, leading to varied use of data for Tier 2 interventions. While some teachers effectively use screening and progress monitoring data, others do not adapt interventions based on specific needs. Many teachers need more training on data analysis, particularly for DIBELS, affecting their ability to tailor instruction. For Tier 3 interventions, schools generally support SPED students, with non-SPED students often receiving it later. To address these issues, recommendations include enhancing teachers'

ability to analyze data, utilizing WIN time effectively for interventions, and establishing consistent expectations for data meetings and intervention adaptation.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has established a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) framework to identify students needing additional assistance and evidence-based instruction effectively. This includes guidance on DIBELS for K-5, which clarifies data usage and progress monitoring expectations. Local schools engage in regular data discussions with grade-level teams, while district leaders participate in cross-office data meetings three times a year. An annual assessment calendar is published to aid in administering required assessments, and the district promotes targeted intervention blocks through sample F.I.T. schedules. Additionally, MCPS is revising its guidance on skills-based grouping for Grades K-5 to enhance support further.

Grades 6-12

Provide detailed information regarding the frequency of data collection for ongoing progress monitoring at the secondary level. Additionally, clarify how Universal Design for Learning aligns with the instructional focus and supports the acceleration of student learning. Specifying the protocols established for data reviews and interventions in secondary instruction is important. Furthermore, identify and explain the nature of guidance provided for interventions at this level.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5

Teachers highlighted a need for improved alignment among MCPS offices involved in literacy instruction, such as ELA, Two-Way Immersion (TWI), EML, and SPED. They reported issues with inconsistent messaging and support, leading to confusion, gaps in implementation, and varied practices across schools. Additionally, teachers experienced differing levels of effectiveness in walkthroughs from school to school. To address these concerns, it is recommended that coordination among district offices be enhanced, clear district-wide expectations for walkthroughs should be established using curriculum-agnostic tools, and these expectations should be aligned with IDA's Knowledge & Practice Standards.

School-based leadership is key to the variability in structured literacy training and implementation at the classroom level. Since much of the work occurs with team planning guided by knowledgeable coaches or instructional leaders, if structured literacy is not prioritized in buildings, these are not happening as reported by teachers. A primary recommendation is centralizing efforts so principals and school leadership teams prioritize literacy implementation with systems in place to support them. Because accountability structures for school administrators, SPED, and EML are siloed, prioritization of literacy implementation must be highly integrated across divisions and come from the top down.

Student progress is assessed after each assessment window. The Office of School Support and Improvement assists educational leaders in continuously monitoring student achievement

and well-being, adhering to established supervision and support protocols.

Grades 6-12

To enhance secondary literacy initiatives, it is essential to incorporate a professional development calendar that outlines specific goals for secondary instruction. The early warning system should be clearly defined to identify students at risk of academic underachievement. Additionally, the relationship between the intensity of interventions, instructional group sizes, and the duration of instructional time must be articulated. It is crucial to provide detailed information regarding the intensive instructional strategies employed to support struggling readers in grades 6-12, ensuring targeted and effective interventions are in place.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5

Parent meetings on literacy varied in focus, ranging from high-level explanations of structured literacy and intervention support to training on decoding and literacy curricula. Some meetings included guidance on how parents can support literacy at home, particularly through oral language and reading in their native language, which was well-received and increased parental confidence. However, there were mixed reactions to sending DIBELS reports home, as they often led to confusion or alarm among parents due to discrepancies with ELA report card grades. To improve outcomes, it is recommended to shift focus from DIBELS data to practical ways parents can support reading at home and to enhance parent engagement by emphasizing strategies for supporting structured literacy through native language reading.

The MTSS Parent Letters and the SHARED DIBELS Home Connect Resources Google Folder have been developed to facilitate communication with families regarding student progress and growth. Consider clarifying the strategies implemented for community engagement at the secondary level.

Grades 6-12

The plan should outline specific methods for community engagement at the secondary level to enhance stakeholder involvement. It is crucial to actively participate in this engagement process to foster stronger connections between the school and the community. Additionally, a clearly defined plan tailored for secondary education should be established to ensure the effective implementation of community engagement strategies.