Completed through a partnership between the Maryland State Department of Education, AIM Institute for Learning & Research, and MILE: Maryland Initiative for Literacy and Equity.

LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Queen Anne's 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 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.

Queen Anne's County Public Schools (QACPS) was evaluated between March and May 2023. 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 initially 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 QACPS leadership 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. However, no focus group, interview, or school visit data was gathered for grades 6-12 as part of the evaluation process.

Focus Groups

Two teacher focus groups, several individual interviews, and one principal focus group were conducted to review literacy implementation across the district. Thirteen 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. Nine 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

Queen Anne's County Public School District (QACPS) embraces a comprehensive approach to literacy embedded in evidence-based literacy practices. The school system's literacy vision is that all students will graduate with the skills necessary to pursue their professional pathways and be empathetic contributors to society. During the 2022-2023 school year, QACPS began adopting a curriculum aligned with evidence-based practices. MCAP outcomes for 3rd graders have steadily increased since 2019, from about 50% to 56% for 2023.

The district 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. Based on the findings, QACPS addresses **Curriculum and Instruction** as it demonstrates alignment of its curriculum with the HMH curriculum, supported by clear system-wide expectations for instructional protocols. Teachers voiced concerns about gaps in coaching around decoding and word recognition instruction, especially in early grades, and the need for more consistency between curriculum materials across grade levels. Through **Professional Development**, professional learning such as long-standing LETRS training and ongoing professional development for evidence-based practices in grades K-2 has shown positive impacts on assessments, according to teachers. In addition, QACPS provides monthly sessions supporting the implementation of the HMH curriculum. Concerns about transitioning to on-demand support due to resource constraints resulted in fewer literacy coaches. Teachers also highlighted the need for additional training post-LETRS, particularly in supporting multilingual learners (MLs). **Multi-tiered support Systems** are in place, evidencing the implementation of flexible Tiers 2 and 3 instruction, supported by regular reviews of trend data to align local and state assessments. Stakeholders utilize a variety of assessments, including HMH, Wilson Fundations, DIBELS, UFLI, Spire, System 44, and Read 180. The District holds monthly meetings to discuss student progress and evaluates i-Ready data three times a year. There's a need for enhanced infrastructure to support all readers effectively. **Instructional leadership** is evidenced through a commitment to equity but requires improved communication and training for administrators. **Community Culture and Engagement** efforts include biannual family meetings focusing on reading and math, individual school activities, and initiatives like Judy Centers offering playgroups and educational sessions on literacy, math, and social-emotional development. There is a need for greater cultural responsiveness training for teachers and improved measurement of family engagement impact.

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 QACPS as being in the mode of ***Sustaining*** the key driver of Curriculum and Instruction, the transition between ***Full Implementation and Sustaining*** for Professional Learning and Multi-tiered systems of support, ***Preparation and Early Implementation*** for Instructional Leadership, and ***Implementation*** for Community Engagement.

Key Findings: Strength & Opportunities

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction: *Sustaining*

Grades K-5

The QACPS curriculum is aligned with the Maryland College and Career Ready Standards (MCCRS) and evidence-based literacy practices. It uses the HMH curriculum.

System-wide expectations regarding the protocol and routines aligned with the curriculum are articulated. For example, the MILE team observed instruction on morphological awareness in small groups in 4th grade and explicit writing instruction in upper elementary classrooms.

However, teachers reported concerns about the need for decoding, word recognition, and syllabication instruction and reinforcements, as well as insufficient alignment and consistency between HMH for grades K-2 and HMH for grades 3-5. They also reported insufficient scaffolding for students who still need foundational phonics support as they move into the HMH Gr. 3-5 content. Additionally, teachers reported a need for more reading materials with diverse stories and characters.

The MILE team did not observe any scaffolding for MLs. The small English language learner staff is reportedly overly committed and is responsible for supporting the entire district.

Grades 6-12

The "Into Reading" curriculum has received a "Meets Expectations" rating from EdReports, demonstrating strong alignment with all five pillars of the Science of Reading. The "Into Reading" curriculum incorporates lessons focused on equity and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), addressing key themes such as relationship building and social awareness. In the middle school ELA curriculum, HMH resources are utilized, complemented by a county-developed writing curriculum. The Savvas English curriculum for high school provides varied writing mastery assessments aligned with standards. It includes opportunities for student choice in reading selections, fostering engagement through activities like Literature Circles and Socratic Seminars. While evidence of language comprehension strategies was limited, the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, supported by graphic organizers with higher-order questions, promotes effective text analysis for all learners.

2.0 Professional Learning: *Full Implementation/Sustaining*

Grades K-5

QACPS provides professional learning opportunities by assessing multiple stakeholder groups' input about student learning needs. The district has longstanding training in LETRS and evidence-based practices across the county for grades K-2, with teachers reporting assessment growth since implementation. School leaders and coaches also receive training.

While there has been a strong cycle for monthly professional development sessions to support knowledge and implementation of the HMH curriculum, teachers reported concerns about moving to "as needed" support as the depletion of resources means fewer literacy coaches. Teachers also reported a need for additional professional learning around implementation post-LETRS training and training to work with MLs. K-3 teachers reported access to varying curricula but limited training about how to enact these Tier 2 and Tier 3 resources.

Additionally, teachers reported a general need for knowledge about cultural responsiveness and how to integrate it within the curriculum and a need for knowledge about ongoing professional development goals.

Grades 6-12
Coaching for reading specialists and interventionists involves targeted support from reading specialists and content supervisors. It focuses on using data to inform instructional practices. Professional development opportunities are offered to reading specialists and interventionists to equip them with the skills necessary to deliver effective academic interventions.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems: *Full Implementation/Sustaining*

Grades K-5

QACPS Tier 1, 2, and 3 instruction provides opportunities for differentiation.

QACPS reviews trend data to monitor alignment and correlate local and state assessments. Building administrators and teachers utilize data to implement pacing conferences, determine students' strengths and weaknesses, identify intervention needs, measure teacher and administration Student Learning Outcomes, set goals, and guide conferences with students and parents.

QACPS assessments consist of screening, diagnostic, formative, and summative measures. They use HMH, Wilson Fundations, DIBELS, UFLI, Spire, System 44, and Read 180 for Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention, with monthly SAM or MES meetings to discuss students and evaluate the 3x/year i-Ready data.

Additionally, the district utilizes a series of systems and structures to facilitate collaborative analysis of and responsiveness to student progress at each grade level, including teacher discussion of flex block scheduling for Tier 3 to ensure students do not miss core/Tier 1 instruction. However, the MILE team only observed this in a few schools. The team observed Tier 1 and 2 instruction and flexible groupings for Tier 2 instruction.

Teachers reported using i-Ready and assessment data to form flexible small groups within the classroom to adjust student groups better to meet their needs. However, focus groups

reported that gifted students, students close to evidencing proficiency, and those more advanced in a specific skill level do not have access to extensions required for reaching higher proficiency levels because of the emphasis placed on foundational reading knowledge.

Additionally, teachers and specialists reported concerns about operating in a “deficit mentality,” as they must wait until a student has fallen up to two years behind before being offered Tier 3 interventions.

Grades 6-12
At the middle school level, iReady is utilized for diagnostic data, supplemented by locally designed English assessments administered at each semester's beginning, middle, and end. These assessments include MCAP-like Evidence-Based Selected Responses (EBSRs) and written analyses. Teachers have received Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training from the Special Education Department, which coordinates Tier 3 interventions.

For grades 9-11, Tier 2 interventions are provided for approximately 45 minutes daily, integrated with students' English classes, while in grades 6-8, Tier 2 interventions occur for about 35 minutes on an A/B day schedule. System 44 and Read 180 are utilized for Tier 2 support. Student progress is monitored using DIBELS, with Individual Reading Inventories (IRIs) employed as necessary. The use of data protocols from iReady and HMH for teachers and reading specialists is well-defined. The curriculum also addresses differentiation strategies for English Language learners and struggling readers. Tier 3 interventions, primarily involving the Wilson and Orton-Gillingham approaches, are coordinated by the Special Education Department, which determines their frequency and implementation. Data is disaggregated in accordance with the linked Blueprint.

4.0 Instructional Leadership: *Preparation/Early Implementation*

Grades K-5
QACPS maintains an Equity and Engagement Committee committed to minimizing learning gaps in student data.

Literacy specialists dedicate time to monitoring school and district performance and identifying trends at least three times a year. Teachers and literacy specialists work together to determine the need for interventions and changes to instruction based on data and progress monitoring in monthly cycles. Literacy goals are discussed in weekly meetings, but teachers reported that since they are early in implementing their curriculum, they need more experience to base decisions on.

Some teachers reported little to no training in the new curriculum and interventions, and professional learning dedicated to the Structured Literacy Program is becoming increasingly limited.

Grades 6-12
The Goals & Metrics column details long-term goals and annual objectives. A linked calendar provides information on specific professional development days and indicates designated testing windows.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement: *Implementation*

QACPS meets regularly with stakeholders to ensure representative groups understand MSDE and QACPS initiatives, including Blueprint- and SoR-related topics. The district has a strong history of community engagement primarily based on school-level activities

QACPS institutes the following initiatives in the implementation of its literacy plan:

- Biannual family meetings for the last 2 years to engage families in reading and math
- Individual school activities
- Judy Centers host playgroups, night programs, and sessions on literacy, math, and social-emotional development

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5
While HMH does have a scope and sequence, teachers reported some areas of concern with the HMH curriculum regarding decoding and word recognition, given its reliance on context and high-frequency words. We recommend that teachers add a review for reinforcement, particularly for parts of the scope and sequence where the curriculum gives minimal attention.

Additionally, teachers need particular support to differentiate and integrate scaffolds for MLs and dialectical speakers.

Grades 6-12
It is essential to integrate explicit reading and writing instruction across all grades 6-8 content areas rather than restricting it to English Language Arts (ELA). Additionally, grades 9-12 guidance should emphasize explicit instruction in all subjects to promote comprehensive literacy development. This integration must include both horizontal and vertical alignment of instructional materials. The district should formulate and implement targeted plans to ensure that all students receive explicit instruction in text structures, engage in extended discussions of complex texts, and develop essential comprehension strategies, such as summarization, main idea identification, and inferencing. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish specific plans that provide explicit instruction in writing strategies while identifying, remediating, and monitoring the progress of struggling and multilingual learners. Consistency in scaffolded practices for English Language learners must be maintained across grade levels and various content areas.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5
QAPCS provides LETRS or similar training for intermediate-level teachers, which is critical for continuity of effort in MTSS and core instruction. The MILE observed that teachers benefit significantly from the job-embedded support from the literacy coaches and the LETRs training. However, teachers have noted that moving to “as needed” has increased the need for additional support.

We recommend that the district continue to provide follow-up training and coaching for teachers on the curriculum and Tier 2-3 intervention materials necessary to help ensure their proficiency with the new evidence-based approaches that will impact student achievement.

Additionally, we recommend that the district ensure teachers have sufficient training to understand the purpose of the varying assessments, how to analyze assessment outcomes, and how to supplement Tiers 1 and 2 to reflect assessment outcomes.

We recommend that the district provide target training for ML coaches. Teachers reported needing training in evidence-based, structured literacy practices, making integrating and scaffolding instruction difficult.

Grades 6-12
There is a pressing need for increased specificity at the secondary level. Professional development should focus on strategy instruction tailored for content area teachers. Additionally, it is essential to differentiate professional learning experiences for content area teachers and those delivering interventions at the secondary level. Clarification of the evidence supporting these initiatives is necessary. Consideration should be given to developing targeted support for teachers conducting interventions. Furthermore, a protocol for learning walks at the secondary level should be established, as well as a systematic process for providing constructive feedback.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5
We recommend that QACPS consider the enhanced infrastructure that will allow support for all readers and explore frameworks that involve the creative use of personnel to address the need for additional literacy support.

Grades 6-12
Evidence for progress monitoring needed to be identified. It is essential to clarify how Universal Design for Learning (UDL) aligns with the instructional focus and how it can effectively support and enhance student learning outcomes. Additionally, professional development should be provided to teachers on applying UDL strategies independent of the curriculum, ensuring they fully comprehend the recommendations offered by the online curriculum.

The timing of Tier 1 core instruction requires further examination, specifically addressing group size, timing, intensity, and focus, as well as the program's alignment with the identified skill needs. Furthermore, intensive strategy instruction in reading must be incorporated into the Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention programs, extending beyond mere word recognition, decoding, and fluency.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5
We recommend that QACPS strengthen communication with school-based administrators

and coaches to ensure that teachers are aware of the district's and individual school sites' expectations and professional development goals.

Additionally, we recommend that the district provide school-based administrator training to help guide creative decision-making and training for personnel to best support literacy goals.

As evidenced by QACPS: *"Instructional Leadership did receive adequate training on the overall HMH program. As Ms. McNeil shared during our debrief with MILE on 7/16/24, Instructional Leadership (as well as teachers) did not receive timely professional development on the Structured Literacy component of the HMH program. HMH was writing the Structured Literacy program throughout the 23-24 school year; therefore, information and training opportunities were fragmented."*

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

To support cultural responsiveness, we recommend that QACPS provide greater training to help teachers understand this approach and integrate this knowledge of families and the community into the curriculum. The district should also create a tool to measure the impact of family engagement activities to provide insight.

Additionally, we recommend that the district create professional learning communities where school teams can meet to explore best practices for the district. Inter-school discussions help ensure greater cohesion with efforts county-wide and promote buy-in and participation.

As evidenced by QACPS: *"QACPS actively promotes community engagement across all schools, although the levels of funding and staff support for organizing quality family engagement events vary between schools. Title I Schools (4 in QACPS) receive mandated funding for family engagement events, unlike other schools. Introducing a district-wide expectation for quarterly, school-specific family engagement events could establish a fair and achievable goal for the district if a funding source could be identified.*

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