



# LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Somerset 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.

Somerset County Public Schools was evaluated between February 2024 and May 2024. 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 Somerset 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. 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. 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 45 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

## LEA Background and Context

Somerset County Public School (SCPS) has developed a comprehensive literacy plan with a central goal: to ensure that all students achieve at grade level by the end of third grade and to have continued support for struggling readers in 4th grade and beyond. The district looks to increase proficiency levels by 10% each year in K-5, with 50% in 2023-24 to 60% in 2024-25. The district looks to boost 6th grade ELA proficiency rates from 40-50% during this period and 8th grade ELA proficiency rates from 35-45% this next school year. The district has adopted a new evidence-aligned curriculum in K-5 in 2022-23 and is looking to adopt a new curriculum for 6-12 in the coming school year and new intervention materials for literacy.

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. For **Curriculum and Instruction**, In the Spring of 2022, SCPS piloted 4 different K-5 curricula, which led to adopting an evidence-aligned program for foundational skills and comprehension and knowledge building (Amplify CKLA) in the fall of 2022. They adopted a new PK ELA curriculum at the end of the 2023-24 school year to be rolled out in the fall. SCPS also adopted Lexia English in 2023 to address the needs of multilingual learners (MLs). This adoption has challenged teachers to adjust to the new highly integrated and demanding curriculum. **Professional Learning** opportunities have included LETRS/Lexia training for understanding evidence-based reading practices and curriculum-based training through CKLA. SCPS has an Office of Mentoring that provides support to coaches.

The need for more professional learning in literacy from teachers is documented in multiple indicators. This includes basic training in the principles underlying the “science of reading” and curriculum implementation and supports embedded within the materials. **Multi-tiered Support Systems** have been under development as the district aligns with the new curriculum. SCPS has a screening and progress monitoring system in place, and data meetings have been established. The implementation of strong Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention approaches, as does the time allocation to Tier 1 instruction, needs to be refined. Teachers are supplanting instruction and intervention materials with their materials to meet the needs of their students. **Instructional Leadership** is also an area under development in which the district faces major challenges regarding shortages of personnel needed to support the literacy initiative. Literacy coaches/specialists are a valued commodity and are the hinge on which this program will work, but they are few and play multiple roles. **Community Engagement** initiatives are diverse and include parents and families in decision-making at the district and school levels. Activities to foster literacy knowledge are seen across schools, including partnerships with Judy Centers.

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 SCPS as being in the mode of **Adoption to Early Implementation** around the key drivers of Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Multi-tiered systems of support, Instructional Leadership, and **Implementation** for Community Engagement.



## **Secondary**

Somerset County conducts academic and literacy-focused Parent Collaborations throughout the year, aligning these events with specific grade-level standards. Schools have formed climate and culture subcommittees within their School Improvement Plans (SIPs) to perform needs assessments, analyze data, and devise strategies for enhancing the educational environment, beginning with establishing long-term and benchmark goals. The Curriculum and Instruction Department at SCPS is actively identifying two primary research-based instructional strategies for integration into professional learning initiatives for the 2024-2025 school year, with clearly defined leadership roles for key action items. Additionally, the CKLA curriculum incorporates diagnostic assessments and emphasizes Universal Design for Learning (UDL). At the same time, systematic support for Multilingual Learners (ML) is embedded in lessons, featuring resources such as an online library with multilingual texts and dictionaries categorized by proficiency levels to facilitate differentiated instruction.

## Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

### 1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

#### Grades K-5

In the literacy plan, the district detailed the rollout of the CKLA curriculum to address foundational skills and knowledge building in the current school year. This is the first full year of curriculum implementation. A small group of teachers piloted it before this year. *It was unclear if some of the challenges discussed below are due to first-year implementation challenges or other reasons.* During school visits, reviewers observed consistency in instruction in kindergarten and first grade at the school level, including explicit phonics instruction with gradual release, targeted phonemic awareness, and attention to morphemes. In K-1, there was a clear connection between writing and the phonics skill lesson, including lessons that integrated authentic writing opportunities with content learning and encouraged the use of evidence from the text. There was high consistency in implementation across these grades, but this was only the case within these grades.

Teachers and administrators mentioned in the focus groups that the curriculum supports higher reading and writing levels than their previous curriculum. They said they could see how elements of the curriculum implemented in earlier grades would build on themselves in later grades, supporting Teachers in upper grades (3-5) in the focus group upper-grade implementation.

While adopting the new curriculum occurred for two years, teachers reported some challenges during this first implementation year. They mentioned not feeling confident about teaching this curriculum. Teachers discussed that the curriculum was very technical and dense and required a lot of background knowledge building for their students, which cut into their time to give the instruction, and that getting through the entire curriculum in the allotted time was difficult (only getting through 5 of 11 units). The teachers described the curriculum as “above grade level” when their students start “below grade level,” making alignment with student ability difficult. Teachers also mentioned that the curriculum builds on itself year to year. Thus, it takes more work to implement it in 2-5 the first year rather than starting in lower grades and rolling up as time passes.

Teachers also reported that the curriculum needed some core components, including systematic writing, explicit grammar and fluency components, fiction standards, and scaffolding support. The county did not purchase the accompanying writing curriculum, so writing instruction is sporadic or supplemental when it appears in the reading curriculum. Some teachers felt that the writing implemented into the curriculum was above students’ abilities without systematic writing instruction. In observing writing in the intermediate grades, the observer noted minimal use of writing conventions (missing capitalization and punctuation) and simple sentence responses.

We did not observe any CKLA instructional materials during the site visit. Teachers were using “teacher-made” materials during the ELA lessons. Most teachers in the focus groups said they are modifying and supplementing the curriculum with other curricula and

resources; however, we did not hear about teachers being trained to choose or create materials to supplement the curriculum.

Small group instruction was observed, but it was unclear whether these groups were for specific ELA skills, for MLs, or students with learning disabilities. Scaffolds for ML students were not observed during core instruction.

### **Grades 6-12**

The CKLA curriculum incorporates a range of scaffolding strategies specifically designed for Multilingual Learners (ML). It features an online library containing texts in Spanish and offers dictionaries in various languages accessible through the student portal. Support for ML is systematically integrated into each lesson and categorized into three proficiency levels—emerging, expanding, and bridging—allowing educators to implement differentiated instructional strategies tailored to individual student needs.

## **2.0 Professional Learning**

### **Grades K-5**

Instructional leadership stated in the focus group that some elementary administrators and teachers are trained in LETRS, which has taken place in previous years. The interviews highlighted that teachers and administrators consider literacy coaches valuable in supporting instruction. Literacy coaches offer coaching cycles; however, multiple teachers observed that they have much on their plate and play multiple roles, limiting their capacity to support instruction. Their primary roles are testing, data analysis, and intervention lessons. Therefore, coaching cycles were sometimes “upon request” instead of systematically integrated.

### **Grades 6-12**

In the focus group, administrators mentioned sustained support for instructional leadership (principals and literacy coaches) around the CKLA curriculum (meeting bi-weekly with CKLA staff). However, teachers discussed needing more professional development around structured literacy, the science of reading, and the CKLA curriculum, as well as greater scaffolding for students and co-teaching support. Teachers mentioned receiving one CKLA curriculum training and visits from CKLA representatives; however, it was reported that the trainer could not complete the training in the allotted time.

## **3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems**

### **Grades K-5**

As detailed in the literacy plan and reported by focus group participants and interviewees, MAP is used to screen students thrice a year. DIBELS is used for progress monitoring, CKLA unit assessments, and “Toothpick assessments” (oral reading fluency and comprehension assessed monthly). Teachers and support staff know the data protocol used consistently in the

schools.

According to the plan, the school improvement teams and the grade-level teams use the Classroom-Focused Improvement Model (CFIP). Class data is analyzed to look for patterns, plan the next steps, and address the needs of students needing enrichment and remediation services for tiers II and III. Focus groups reported that team meetings occur at least twice a month and that literacy facilitators work with teachers on screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring. Administrators discussed in the focus group that data is monitored for segmented groups by literacy coaches.

According to the plan, all schools have a daily 30-minute intervention/enrichment block using Lexia Core 5 and CKLA intervention for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. However, due to schedule fluctuations and the need for students' math and reading interventions, reading interventions may occur less frequently than needed. Focus groups also reported that teachers often create their own materials for interventions, particularly when the specified programs do not work.

#### **Grades 6-12**

The CKLA curriculum incorporates diagnostic assessments and emphasizes Universal Design for Learning (UDL), with all staff trained over a two-year professional development plan. School-level data meetings are held bi-monthly, and intervention teacher meetings occur quarterly to monitor student progress. ELA instruction is provided daily at the high school level, with various course formats available. Lexia PowerUp and customized plans support students not College and Career Ready (CCR) by the end of grade 10, along with intervention classes for those with decoding and comprehension difficulties.

### **4.0 Instructional Leadership**

#### **Grades K-5**

According to the comprehensive literacy plan, the elementary schools undergo full root cause analysis training each year and then move through that data process with Reading standards and skills. The plan includes a description of the group's work. Findings are shared with School Improvement Teams, Elementary reading, and Early Childhood subcommittees.

MAP assessments are conducted three times a year, and an administrator discussed reviewing disaggregated data with other instructional leadership at the school. Grade-level goals have been specified, but no demographic goals for closing gaps have been provided.

The plan's walk-through tool is modified yearly based on the school and county's focus. Part of the walk-through is related to general evidence-based practices that apply to any subject, but some "look-fors" are specific to Reading. One of the checks is that the curriculum materials are being used with fidelity during the reading block.



Focus group discussions highlighted that having enough staffing to implement programs seemed like a very present barrier to literacy implementation in the school district.

### **Grades 6-12**

The plan commences with the establishment of long-term and benchmark goals. Schools are tasked with formulating their own short- and long-term objectives through a School Improvement Plan (SIP). The Curriculum and Instruction Department at SCPS is actively engaged in identifying two primary research-based instructional strategies to be integrated into all professional learning initiatives for the 2024-2025 school year. Leadership roles for key action items are clearly delineated throughout the plan.

## **5.0 Community Culture and Engagement**

### **Grades K-5**

According to the plan, Countywide Parent Advisory Council (CPAC) meetings are held quarterly to share information with parents about the school system's academic and management components. Central Office staff, supervisors, principals, parents, and community stakeholders are invited to CPAC meetings. In addition, School Improvement Team meetings are held at least monthly at the elementary schools, and parents are encouraged to attend and join one of the subcommittees.

Focus group discussions highlighted that reading coaches run family engagement events throughout the year, highlighting literacy instruction, reading themes, and understanding assessments the district uses. One school administrator mentioned that their school has a Spanish-speaking liaison who works with families on literacy initiatives.

Some teachers also discussed sending books and reading engagement tools home. A focus group reported that kindergarten at one school partners with the Judy Center, which runs many engagement activities for them.

### **Grades 6-12**

Somerset County organizes academic and literary-focused Parent Collaborations at various times throughout the year, tailored to specific grade levels to align with each grade's academic standards. Schools have established climate and culture subcommittees within their School Improvement Plans that conduct needs assessments, analyze school and state data, and develop strategies and evaluation tools to enhance the educational environment.

## **Recommendations: Next Steps**

## 1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

### Grades K-5

To address the need for more confidence in the curriculum, it is recommended that the district provide more professional development on the CKLA curriculum and SoR instruction, especially on time management and scaffolding for students who need it. While the plan suggests that CKLA training has been ongoing this past school year, it may need to be adjusted to address the concerns of the staff. Using a highly structured program like CKLA that integrates all literacy components means that any piecemeal use of the curriculum disrupts the integrity and the horizontal and vertical alignment. Teachers are working hard to fill in the gaps without the benefit of fully understanding the curriculum or how the pieces fit together.

The duration of the literacy block needs to accommodate the size and scope of the curriculum since it integrates foundational skills and knowledge building. The teachers need to be able to adjust the time and intensity of instruction with a reasonable amount of time allocated to do so.

### Grades 6-12

The review indicates a need for Tier 1 science and social studies guidance. It is essential to develop explicit vocabulary instruction at the secondary level. Emphasis should be placed on explicitly teaching text structures, providing opportunities for close reading, and employing effective reading strategies. Additionally, it is necessary to outline guidance for explicit writing strategies, highlighting the integration of reading and writing within content areas. Appropriate scaffolding measures for writing should be designed to support struggling and multilingual learners.

## 2.0 Professional Learning

### Grades K-5

It is highly recommended that the district work toward obtaining the professional learning needs on structured literacy and evidence-based practices and implementing them in the CKLA curriculum, which is being requested directly from the teachers. It is still being determined whether the online materials provided are beneficial or even utilized. The district needs support for literacy coaches to sustain the implementation of the curriculum.

### Grades 6-12

Ensuring professional development (PD) is vertically aligned with the institution's long-term vision is crucial. Further clarification is needed on how secondary teachers are supported in this alignment. A more detailed description of the tiered distribution of PD is essential. Additionally, it is important to identify the professional learning opportunities recognized by the equity committee. Lastly, it would be beneficial to describe the methods by which leaders observe educators delivering academic interventions and how they provide ongoing feedback and support to enhance instructional practices.



Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are consistently utilized with the Office of Mentoring and instructional coaching cycles. A structured coaching plan is implemented to support ongoing professional development (PD), particularly for new and novice educators. Resources for core instruction are equitably distributed across all schools. Additionally, students with disabilities, English Learners, and those experiencing reading difficulties receive supplementary resources to enhance their reading proficiency.

### **3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems**

#### **Grades K-5**

There is a question about whether teachers, outside of literacy facilitators, can monitor specific student skills or curriculum retention through the assessments provided. Some teachers mentioned that they needed to align with what was being taught. It also needed to be made clear whether the data was being used to inform instructional changes or adjustments outside of the small group of students being pulled for intervention.

Teachers in the focus groups discussed creating their materials and lessons for intervention. They mentioned that this is a lot of work. There are intervention curricula (LLI and Lexia), but teachers mentioned that they do not work for all students. Interventions should be evidence-based and aligned to the curriculum (Tier 2) and student needs. Teacher-created materials likely need to meet these criteria. Programs like LLI are also not aligned with the CKLA curricula.

#### **Grades 6-12**

The review indicates a lack of evidence specifically related to secondary education. It is essential to articulate how Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is aligned with the instructional focus in the county and how it is utilized to support and enhance learning at the secondary level. Additionally, a description of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) protocols employed during these meetings to meet established indicators is necessary. Ensuring students can access texts and integrated literacy instruction across all secondary content areas is important. Further details regarding Tier II and Tier III instruction at the secondary level are required, including group size, duration, intensity, and progress monitoring methods. Examples of disaggregated data illustrating student outcomes in these tiers should also be provided.

### **4.0 Instructional Leadership**

#### **Grades K-5**

Focus group discussions highlighted that having enough staffing to implement programs seemed like a very present barrier to literacy implementation in the school district. We recommend training around creative decision-making with tight budgets.

Despite teachers being involved in the piloting and selecting the new curriculum, some teachers mentioned feeling disconnected from administrators with the feedback they provided around curriculum implementation. Working toward building feedback loops with teachers and central administration may provide better buy-in with the mission and vision of the new direction for literacy instruction.

**Grades 6-12**

A comprehensive plan is needed to outline how teachers and administrators will communicate progress toward goals at the secondary level. Finalizing the calendar for the 2024-2025 school year and beyond is important, detailing the frequency of these progress-sharing processes throughout the academic year. Additionally, identifying trends within disaggregated student populations will be essential for targeted improvements. An overview of the walkthrough tools utilized at the secondary level should also be included to support instructional effectiveness.

**5.0 Community Culture and Engagement****Grades K-5**

Finding ways to document all the activities through central administration and creating a repository of activities is a way of gathering evidence on effective activities that may be replicated across the district to increase family engagement.

**Grades 6-12**

It is essential to integrate this data effectively to support key initiatives. Consider how existing systems can be better adapted to reflect the specific needs of the secondary educational environment.