



LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	St. Mary's County Public Schools
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Study Purpose and Approach

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and Accountability and Implementation Board (AIB) contracted with the Maryland Initiative for Literacy & Equity (MILE) to evaluate literacy instruction across all 24 Maryland LEAs. This evaluation stems from a [joint resolution](#) by MSDE and AIB in November 2023. The evaluation was designed to focus on collaboration and capacity-building across all stakeholder groups, ultimately leading to statewide recommendations for technical assistance supporting reading development for all students in Maryland. Standard protocols were developed by translating IDA's Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading and practical implementation research into key success indicators through MILE and AIM Institute for Learning & Research collaboration. All protocols are available for review upon request, although MILE and AIM Institute for Learning & Research maintain ownership, and other users may not adapt these protocols.

The St. Mary's 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 literacy experts provided both written and oral feedback to St. Mary's County Public Schools for revision of 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 11 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. Sixteen classroom observations were conducted in April 2024 to provide data on classroom literacy implementation. Note, however, that these visits were limited in scope and not designed to capture a representative sample due to time constraints. One literacy expert conducted classroom observations using a standard observation protocol and lasted between 5 and 15 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

LEA Background and Context

St. Mary's County Public School District's (SMCPS) vision is to provide literacy instruction based on the science of reading so that students can lead successful lives after graduation. St. Mary's County has provided LETRS training to teachers who wanted reading in the science of reading to support that vision. Without making LETRS training mandatory, 70% of the elementary school instructional staff have already participated. In addition, the district has transitioned to a new text/curriculum for elementary reading/language arts.

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. Several key findings emerge regarding the current status of implementation across various domains. In **Curriculum and Instruction** (1.0), the district has adopted Benchmark Advance for elementary reading and language arts as of the 2023-24 school year. Initial challenges were noted among teachers, yet they are now beginning to witness the benefits of this structured literacy approach, supplemented by Heggerty and Wilson Foundations for early grades. **Professional Learning** (2.0) initiatives have seen 70% participation from K-5 teachers in LETRS training since 2021, alongside ongoing professional development and PLCs. The district plans to continue this trajectory with sustained training in Benchmark Advance over the next five years. **Multi-tiered Support Systems** (3.0) highlight a robust commitment to MTSS, involving instructional resource teachers and collaborative efforts among support staff for small group instruction. **Instructional Leadership** (4.0) emphasizes widespread LETRS training among principals to enhance instructional support and evaluation practices, complemented by classroom walkthroughs. **Community Culture and Engagement** (5.0) initiatives, particularly in Title 1 schools, underscore multiple literacy nights tailored by grade level, reflecting a decentralized approach managed by school principals.

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 SMCPS as **Preparation to Implementation** for Curriculum & Instruction, Professional Learning, and MTSS. **Sustainability** for Instructional Leadership, and **Exploration to Preparation** for Community Culture.

Secondary

SMCPS has formed numerous community partnerships and actively seeks feedback from school-based staff; however, it has not yet implemented initiatives to assess families' literacy knowledge, strengths, and needs. While the district has mechanisms for capturing cultural and climate data to inform key initiatives, similar frameworks for literacy initiatives are currently absent. Developing a Comprehensive Literacy Plan aims to enhance collaborative engagement by transparently sharing this plan with all stakeholders. Furthermore, secondary Instructional Resource Teachers (IRTs) and literacy coaches will engage in data analysis meetings to deepen understanding of student performance. At the same time, content supervisors will review data with principals in monthly meetings to ensure instructional strategies are evidence-based and aligned with literacy goals.

Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Implementation Status: *Moving from Preparation to Implementation*

Grades K-5

Benchmark Advance is used for elementary reading/language arts. The district began using it for the 2023-24 school year. As with all significant transitions, the teachers struggled but are beginning to see the results of using a structured literacy curriculum. Tier 1 instruction is supplemented by Heggerty (Pre-K-1) and Wilson Foundations (K-3).

Grades 6-12

The district has established comprehensive Tier I guidance for writing instruction, ensuring clarity and consistency in teaching practices. The strategies for close reading outlined in the plan are well-defined and grounded in established pedagogical practices. Structured Tier I guidance for vocabulary development has been implemented to enhance student comprehension and language acquisition. Educators are provided with initial training on delivering explicit instruction and supportive scaffolding tailored for English Learners, promoting effective engagement and learning.

2.0 Professional Learning

Implementation Status: *Moving from Preparation to Implementation*

Grades K-5

The district made LETRS training available for teachers and administrators in 2021. Although it was voluntary, seventy percent of K-5 teachers at the elementary level have enrolled or finished LETRS training. The district provides continued training through professional development and PLCs. Continued training for Benchmark Advance is expected over the next five years. The comprehensive literacy plan discusses plans for upcoming intensive and sustainable training. Much of the professional development in schools is driven by district initiatives.

Grades 6-12

Regularly convened in each building to foster collaboration and shared learning among educators. Secondary Instructional Resource Teachers (IRTs) and Literacy Coaches provide job-embedded professional development and instructional coaching, aligning with system-wide initiatives and addressing the specific needs identified by individual school administration teams. Comprehensive content, including model units and lessons for all secondary English Language Arts (ELA) courses, is available on the Schoology platform. Over the past two years, 60 secondary teachers and 13 teacher leaders have participated in Reading Apprenticeship training, which has enhanced their instructional practices in reading. Next year, a new leadership cohort will be established to support ongoing professional development for existing participants and new teachers interested in Reading Apprenticeship training. Team meetings are conducted following each administration of universal screening to analyze data and inform instructional practices.

<p>3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems</p>	<p>Implementation Status: <i>Moving from Preparation to Implementation</i></p>
<p>Grades K-5 The district is invested in MTSS. Instructional resource teachers (IRTs) are involved and hands-on in the MTSS process, teaching small groups in every classroom that need support. SMCPS promotes collaboration with support staff, including but not limited to special educators, ESOL teachers, and speech pathologists, when planning for small group instruction. Teacher assistants are also involved in supporting small-group instruction.</p> <p>Grades 6-12 The district intends to develop specific protocols for implementing Tier II interventions for students in grades 6 and above. Additionally, it plans to offer professional learning opportunities focused on differentiating Tier I instruction to better meet diverse student needs. Each school will establish its schedule and framework for subsequent data meetings to facilitate ongoing analysis and improvement. Furthermore, during the 2023-2024 school year, SMCPS successfully provided Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training to all Pre-K to 12th grade staff, reinforcing the district’s commitment to inclusive and effective instructional practices.</p>	
<p>4.0 Instructional Leadership</p>	<p>Implementation Status: <i>Sustainability</i></p>
<p>Grades K-12 Most principals have been trained in LETRS to support instruction and provide fair evaluations. School administrators also learn by conducting walkthroughs in classrooms. SMCPS believes that school-based leaders should have the same training as teachers.</p> <p>Grades 6-12 SMCPS is developing a Comprehensive Literacy Plan, which will be transparently shared with all stakeholders to promote collaborative engagement. Following county assessments, secondary Instructional Resource Teachers (IRTs) and literacy coaches will participate in meetings designed to conduct data analysis, fostering a deeper understanding of student performance. Additionally, content supervisors will review relevant data with principals during monthly meetings, ensuring that instructional strategies are informed by evidence and aligned with the district’s literacy goals. This structured approach underscores the district’s commitment to enhancing literacy outcomes through collaborative analysis and informed decision-making.</p>	
<p>5.0 Community Culture and Engagement</p>	<p>Implementation Status: <i>Moving from Exploration to Preparation</i></p>
<p>Grades K-5 SMCPS is working to strengthen this domain. That said, the LEA engages in some promising practices. Title 1 schools tend to have more than one literacy night. Principals have some</p>	



autonomy over what is involved in literacy nights. Some schools have literacy nights that are done by grade level.

Grades 6-12

While SMCPS has established numerous community partnerships and actively solicits feedback from school-based staff, it has yet to engage in activities to assess families' literacy knowledge, strengths, and needs. Although the district has structures to capture cultural and climate data for informing key initiatives, similar frameworks still need to be explicitly added for literacy initiatives.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

The district has adopted a new curriculum and text. As with any new dynamic, it takes time to become an expert in implementation. Although teachers are still developing expertise, they are following instructions and processes outlined in Benchmark Advance. Support is needed regarding some instructional practices in word recognition. Language comprehension and expression training (word, sentence, and text levels) are needed. Title 1 schools are receiving students who are English learners. Training should be provided in instructional practices that will give teachers an understanding that those students possess linguistic assets and how those assets can be used to build reading comprehension. Essentially, teachers need to know what that instruction looks like. Training in language comprehension and supporting, guiding, and correcting instructional practices in word recognition instruction is recommended.

Grades 6-12

Implement training for all middle school educators on the use of Patterns of Power, along with the development of grade-level lessons for the Literacy Lab block, starting in the 2024-2025 school year. The Novel Approval Committee will continually review and adopt a diverse selection of high-quality, engaging novels and literary non-fiction throughout the school year to enhance student choice and reading engagement. The district will collaborate with the Department of Equity, Engagement, and Early Access to identify and utilize resources that support culturally responsive and sustaining educational practices. Ensure all educators are informed about available resources and know how to access them. Create a guidance document delineating culturally responsive and sustaining education practices cross-referenced with current Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-12

The district provides several opportunities for teachers and administrators to train and continue their professional growth in the science of reading. Training is recommended in culturally responsive sustaining education, especially for Title 1 schools. Due to changing demographics in St. Mary's County, all teachers should have training.

Grades 6-12

To enhance professional learning opportunities, the district is suggested to develop targeted training for individuals delivering intervention programs and expand resources focused on strategy instruction for content area teachers. Additionally, the guidance document should be updated to include provisions for small-group instruction tailored explicitly to secondary grades. Training should also incorporate strategies for modifying the duration and intensity of instructional components based on student performance data. Establishing a clear timeline for implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in each school building will

further support these initiatives. Finally, ensuring that all staff members have equitable access to professional development opportunities to promote comprehensive growth and support throughout the educational community is essential.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

While the district emphasizes tiered interventions, there may be disparities in access to interventions for students from diverse backgrounds. Addressing resource limitations and ensuring equitable access to interventions for all students is essential to support diverse learning needs.

Continuous professional development opportunities are essential to building staff capacity and implementing MTSS effectively. Training sessions and workshops on data analysis, intervention strategies, and progress monitoring can empower teachers to meet their students' diverse needs.

Exploring alternative funding sources and reallocating resources to prioritize interventions for students with the greatest needs can help address these constraints.

Grades 6-12

It is suggested that the district evaluate how the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training supports instructional acceleration and aligns with the overall instructional focus. The district should continue with its current plan while assessing the effectiveness of procedures in identifying at-risk students and ensuring equitable access to intervention services. Additionally, it is recommended that the district establish clear feedback cycles for intervention teachers at the secondary level to facilitate continuous improvement and support in instructional practices. This comprehensive approach will enhance the district's ability to meet the diverse needs of its student population.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-12

Further support is recommended for teachers to integrate Culturally Relevant Materials. Support more time allocation to allow teachers more time for collaboration.

Grades 6-12

It is essential to ensure that key literacy initiatives are clearly defined and effectively communicated, with all stakeholders understanding their roles in implementing and monitoring each initiative. While the attachments reference data meetings, they do not specify their timing in relation to the testing calendar, necessitating clarification. Additionally, discussions should focus on increasing the intensity of interventions across Tiers II and III, acknowledging that group sizes decrease as intensity increases. It is crucial to confirm that

increasingly intensive interventions are accessible to secondary students, enhancing support for this demographic. This structured approach will facilitate improved literacy outcomes through targeted intervention strategies.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5

Although schools participate in literacy nights/activities, including Title 1 schools, which participate in several yearly activities, many expressed that community culture and engagement need improvement. Further support and Integration of Culturally Relevant Materials for teachers is recommended.

Grades 6-12

When developing feedback and sustainability protocols, it is important to consider the specific needs of the secondary student population. The district should evaluate existing practices for gathering stakeholder information to ensure comprehensive input and engagement. Additionally, measures should be differentiated at the secondary level to address students' diverse needs effectively. It is also vital to assess the current structures and incorporate climate and culture data feedback to inform continuous improvement efforts. This approach will enhance the relevance and effectiveness of initiatives supporting secondary students.