LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Talbot 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.

Talbot 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 written and oral feedback to Talbot 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
One teacher focus group, several individual interviews, and one administrator focus group were conducted to review literacy implementation across the district. Twelve 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. Eight classroom observations were conducted in March 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 for about 15 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

Since 2019, Talbot County Public School District (TCPS) has seen 3rd graders' reading proficiency on MCAP decline from 47% to 35%. To address this decline, TCPS has implemented evidence-based literacy strategies to realize its vision of ensuring that every child graduates prepared for both college and a career. They have adopted a vision for every child to be college or career-ready.

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. TCPS shows a systematic approach across various domains. In **Curriculum and Instruction**, teachers are transitioning to new programs like Benchmark while utilizing resources like Wonders and the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) to emphasize phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension across K-5 tiers. **Professional Learning** initiatives are advancing with LETRS training for administrators and teachers, including specialized training for PreK, K, and intervention staff, complemented by regular PLC meetings and peer coaching. **Multi-tiered support systems** are being prepared with assessments like DIBELS to drive interventions and consistent use of UFLI materials, supported by collaborative efforts between general education, special education, and ELL teachers. **Instructional Leadership** is implemented through principals leading data meetings and professional learning sessions. **Community Engagement** efforts are gearing up to involve all stakeholders, ensuring support for diverse learners with bilingual resources and at-home materials facilitated through county-wide communication platforms like Remind.

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 TCPS as moving from *Early Implementation* in the key drivers of Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Multi-tiered systems of support, and Community Engagement and Implementation for Instructional Leadership.

Secondary

The plan identifies Community, Culture, and Engagement as vital areas for exploration within secondary education, emphasizing the need for school-based teams to conduct a root-cause analysis of climate surveys to establish specific priorities. These teams will also identify and engage with community members and organizations to bolster support for the educational environment. Additionally, establishing school-based literacy committees comprising members from the district's 4-8 team will enhance collaboration and support for literacy initiatives in grades 6-8. The plan includes key initiatives for improving literacy assessment and instruction for grades 6-12, such as the implementation of curriculum-agnostic assessments, development of a reading assessment guide, and provision of targeted interventions for students demonstrating foundational skill gaps while also ensuring ongoing professional development in Science of Reading and

comprehension-building practices.

Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction	Implementation Status: Early Implementation

Grades K-5
Teachers are participating in a year-long pilot of the Benchmark reading program, while others continue to use the Wonders program. Both programs and resources from the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) are employed in classrooms to develop phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills across tiers 1-3 for students in grades K-5.

Grades 6-12
Students receiving special education services in reading or writing are enrolled in semester or year-long Reading/Writing labs tailored to their individual needs. In all three secondary schools, students who receive English language support but do not qualify for Sheltered Instruction receive specialized instruction and scaffolding from general education teachers in the core English classroom, often in collaboration with ESOL co-teachers.

Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) receiving push-in support in reading or writing are integrated into the general education setting alongside a general education teacher and a special education co-teacher. Continuous professional development is provided on best practices for building comprehension in Tier 1 instruction, focusing on strategies such as enhancing students' world and word knowledge, facilitating opportunities for questioning, teaching routines for determining text gist, and encouraging self-monitoring of comprehension. The board has adopted the StudySync curriculum for 11th and 12th grades, replacing the Springboard Curriculum to ensure alignment of reading, thinking, and writing routines across grade levels.

2.0 Professional Learning	Implementation Status: Early Implementation

Grades K-5
Two years ago, system-wide training with LETRS began, covering Early LETRS for PreK and K teachers, alongside comprehensive training for all K-3 teachers in University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) materials. Additional system-wide training focused on DIBELS and the Science of Reading. Coaching methods such as peer modeling are employed, supplemented by weekly Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings. The district's instructional Assistants (IAs) also receive training in UFLI methodologies, enhancing overall instructional support.

Grades 6-12
The plan outlines several next steps aimed at enhancing literacy instruction. Key actions include participation in Science of Reading (SoR) training and identifying appropriate

training resources for secondary literacy educators. Teacher-leaders within the 6th-grade Professional Learning Community (PLC) will be selected to facilitate the 7th-grade PLC for the 2025-2026 school year. Key stakeholders from the 7th-grade English Language Arts team will be invited to observe the final inquiry cycle of the 6th-grade PLC. Continuous inquiry cycles will be implemented alongside professional learning sessions focused on utilizing MAP Growth data for data-informed instructional decisions and addressing topics such as the Science of Reading, Tier 2 interventions, and strategies for working with multilingual learners. Ongoing professional development will emphasize comprehension-building practices for Tier 1 instruction, guiding students in developing their world and word knowledge, engaging in question-and-answer opportunities, determining the gist of texts, and monitoring comprehension throughout the reading, as recommended by the Institute of Education Sciences (2022). Additionally, English Language Arts supervisors will conduct walkthroughs and provide observational feedback to enhance teacher performance.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems	**Implementation Status**: Early Implementation

Grades K-5
Students in grades K-5 are assessed using DIBELS to track progress and guide intervention strategies. Intervention efforts are consistently supported with materials from the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI). Additionally, there is collaboration between general education classes and support teachers from special education and English Language Learner (ELL) programs, ensuring comprehensive support for diverse student needs within mainstream education settings.

Grades 6-12
The plan involves several key initiatives for enhancing literacy assessment and instruction for grades 6-12. It includes identifying curriculum-agnostic assessments tailored to this grade range and developing a reading assessment guide specifically for grades 6-8. Following the initial administration of the MAP assessment, students requiring additional diagnostic testing will be identified based on the guidelines outlined in the reading assessment guide. The plan also indicates a review and evaluation of the current Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) processes utilized across schools, alongside the acquisition of Unified Insights as the district's new data management system. Furthermore, resources will be identified to assist English Language Arts teachers deliver language standards instruction during Tier 1. At the same time, UFLI Foundations will be employed to provide Tier 3 interventions for incoming 6th to 8th-grade students who exhibit gaps in foundational reading skills, as determined by the Words Their Way spelling inventory results.

4.0 Instructional Leadership	**Implementation Status**: Implementation

Grades K-5
Principals and assistant principals receive literacy support training through LETRS, specifically designed for administrators. They actively lead data meetings and facilitate professional learning opportunities within their schools. They emphasize a hands-on

approach to improving literacy outcomes through strategic leadership and informed decision-making based on data analysis. Implementing quarterly professional development sessions for principals that align with their school-specific literacy goals.

Grades 6-12

The plan emphasizes the establishment of school-based literacy committees comprising members from the district's 4-8 team, specifically targeting grades 6-8. It designates secondary education staff to lead literacy professional learning initiatives, conduct walkthroughs, and provide observational feedback to teachers. Additionally, the plan ensures that these literacy committees convene regularly, fostering active participation from the 4-8 district team to enhance collaboration and bolster support for literacy initiatives across the schools.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement	**Implementation Status**: Early Implementation

Grades K-5
Administrators and teachers emphasize the involvement of all stakeholders in literacy initiatives, aiming to support every learner. They ensure support for multilingual (ML) learners in both Spanish and English through bilingual teachers and communications in both languages. They provide at-home materials for all students to reinforce learning beyond the classroom. Additionally, they utilize Remind county-wide to effectively share information and engage with the community, enhancing communication and collaboration in literacy efforts.

Grades 6-12
The plan identifies Community, Culture, and Engagement as critical areas for further exploration and analysis within secondary education. School-based teams will be convened to conduct a root-cause analysis of climate surveys, allowing them to establish school-specific priorities. Additionally, these teams will identify and engage with community members and organizations to seek support for enhancing the educational environment.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5
Teachers and administrators expressed enthusiasm about transitioning to the new Benchmark program. They highlighted plans to enhance support for multilingual (ML) learners through improved instructional materials and teaching strategies. Furthermore, there is a concerted effort to implement a unified approach in evaluating progress using reports from DIBELS and UFLI, ensuring consistent and effective monitoring of student development across the board.

Grades 6-12

Instructional plans must be designed to ensure that students receive direct instruction in vocabulary, word awareness, synonyms and context cues, and morphological awareness while equipping teachers with the necessary training. Students should engage with complex texts and utilize strategies that facilitate access to content, enhancing their ability to identify the main idea or gist. Instruction should encompass text structure, providing students with opportunities to discuss texts to deepen their understanding of main ideas and meanings.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

Teachers and administrators emphasized the necessity of additional reading coaches to aid in implementing structured literacy and the new Benchmark Core program. They also highlighted the importance of training Instructional Assistants (IAs) to support learners better and streamline teaching practices, aiming to enhance overall educational effectiveness and student support within the literacy framework.

Implement plans that include dedicated sections for Science of Reading (SoR) training, explicitly detailing the time and intensity of these training sessions. Inquiry cycles should be structured to occur once per quarter, emphasizing addressing the duration and intensity of interventions within these cycles or professional learning opportunities.

Provide targeted professional learning for teachers and administrators, including topics such as the Science of Reading, Tier 2 interventions, and strategies for working with multilingual learners, specifically for selected Reading, ESOL, and special education (SPED) teachers. Engage educators in continuous professional development focused on effective comprehension-building practices for Tier 1 instruction. This training should encompass strategies that enhance students' world and word knowledge, provide consistent opportunities for inquiry through questioning, teach routines for summarizing text, and guide students in monitoring their comprehension while reading (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). ELA supervisors should have opportunities to conduct walkthroughs and provide observational feedback to teachers, facilitating the continuous improvement of instructional practices.

Grades 6-12

The implementation plan emphasizes the importance of Professional Learning sessions for Science of Reading (SoR) training, necessitating a clear outline of the time and intensity allocated for these sessions. It is recommended that inquiry cycles be aligned to occur once per quarter, with specific attention given to the time and intensity of interventions discussed during these cycles or professional learning opportunities. To address equity in resource distribution within TCPS, it would be beneficial to integrate insights from the needs assessment and High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) training that connect research-based SoR strategies with culturally responsive and sustaining practices tailored to teacher needs. Furthermore, while culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies are referenced, clarity is needed regarding which approach will be emphasized in the training. The plan also highlights the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) process and its impact on reducing referrals to child study. Regular monitoring of progress toward goals is essential, and it is critical to ensure that walkthroughs and observational feedback for teachers delivering interventions are aligned with the

principles established in professional learning.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5
When the district fully implements the Benchmark program, some materials will be available for Tier 2 instruction, enhancing support for students needing additional intervention. Additionally, there is a focus on incorporating culturally relevant materials to support multilingual (ML) learners better and ensure their educational needs are met meaningfully and inclusively.

Grades 6-12
It is essential to ensure that all students in grades 6-12 identified as at risk for reading difficulties receive the appropriate reading interventions necessary for their development. Clearly specify plans for identifying student instructional needs, implementing remediation strategies, and monitoring progress toward established goals. The plan should include specific strategies to ensure alignment between intervention settings and classroom instruction, facilitating a cohesive learning experience. Teachers must provide multiple opportunities for students to practice the strategies taught in intervention settings throughout their school day. As the intensity of interventions increases, it is crucial to reduce group sizes to enhance the effectiveness of instruction. Sufficient time should be allocated for interventions to increase intensity and maximize student engagement and progress.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5
The district is cautious as it begins to address the challenges faced by English Language Learners (ELLs). Despite concerns, educators strongly desire to support these students effectively and ensure their continuous academic growth. The current analysis does not mention the use of disaggregated data.

Grades 6-12
The plan needs to clearly define time-bound goals and mention implementing an Early Warning System. There is a need for clarity regarding the proportion of training dedicated to key initiatives, as secondary grades are not specified on the calendar. It is essential to articulate the roles of administrative and district staff in this process, including a thorough analysis of disaggregated data. Additionally, the assessment tool should align with established practice standards. To enhance stakeholder engagement, it is crucial to outline the methods for gathering input from a broad range of parties beyond the current committees and the frequency of committee meetings.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5

Improvements to existing programs are being focused on to enhance community engagement. Additionally, new initiatives are being developed to actively involve the community in understanding and meeting the needs of multilingual (ML) learners, fostering a collaborative approach to education and support. As you research ways of addressing this area, consider convening school based teams to determine school based priorities.

Grades 6-12

It is essential to prioritize the methods for collecting and analyzing data effectively. The district intends to hire a Community Program Manager for one of its middle schools; therefore, clarification regarding the status of similar roles at other secondary schools is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of community engagement initiatives.