



# LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Washington 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) team 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.

Washington County Public Schools (WCPS) 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 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 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 Washington County Public School District 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 248 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. Thirty 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 pertaining to intermediate classrooms (grades 3-5) in particular. One literacy expert conducted classroom observations using a

standard observation protocol and lasted for 15 or 20 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

## Introductory Statement

Washington County Public Schools embraces a comprehensive approach to literacy embedded in the Science of Reading (SoR) research. The literacy vision of the district identifies the process for a redesign initiative that shifts from Balanced Literacy to Structured Literacy and a SOR-aligned curriculum: Vision, Skills, Incentives, Resources, and Action Plan = Success. The ELA/Social Studies team used this structure as they designed the 1.5-year-long process for the adoption and initial roll-out of the Comprehensive Literacy Plan (CLP). The need for enhanced literacy instruction influenced the decision to make this shift. WCPS has been implementing the Comprehensive Literacy Plan since 2020. The district adopted new evidence-aligned instructional materials in the 2023-24 school year.

The findings from the Washington County Public Schools (WCPS) literacy plan review highlight several strengths and areas for improvement across various domains regarding embracing and enacting evidence-based literacy practices. In terms of **curriculum and instruction**, WCPS demonstrates strong alignment with evidence-based literacy practices by implementing Amplify's CKLA and CKLA Skills materials, which benefit primary grades with consistent and engaging literacy instruction. However, challenges in implementing structured literacy are noted in intermediate grades, suggesting a need for more rigorous lesson design and differentiated learning opportunities to enhance student engagement and achievement. WCPS supports **Professional Learning** by providing robust support for teachers through comprehensive training and ongoing professional development, including a recent mandate for the Science of Reading course. Recommendations include ensuring all teachers in PreK-5 take the SoR course and tailoring professional learning to address the differing needs between early and intermediate-grade educators. In addition, the WCPS **Multi-tiered Support Systems** are comprehensive, utilizing data-driven approaches such as DIBELS assessments and the '4As Process' to support student learning. Recommendations include enhancing Tier 1 instruction in grades 3-5 with explicit language lessons and improving tracking and feedback mechanisms in Tier 2 to address diverse student needs effectively. WCPS addresses **Instructional Leadership** through collaborative efforts among administrators to support effective instructional practices aligned with CKLA and evidence-based literacy practices. Recommendations focus on standardizing planning time for teachers and reinforcing data-driven instructional supports to sustain literacy initiatives, especially in grades 3-5. Lastly, WCPS addresses **Community Culture and Engagement** through engagement with stakeholders through various initiatives like literacy nights and community partnerships. Recommendations encourage further integration of families and communities as partners in supporting the district's instructional goals.

The district was evaluated according to the [EPIS Framework](#), which system-wide implementation of evidence-based practices is evaluated 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. The reviewers identified WCPS as moving from **implementation** to **sustainment** around the key drivers of Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Learning, Multi-tiered systems of support, Instructional Leadership, and Community Engagement. Based on the key findings, the recommended goals are to continue adjusting and refining practices concerning implementation in grades 3-5.

### **Secondary**

The district has adopted Amplify ELA as the new curriculum for middle school students, utilizing disaggregated student data to enhance instructional practices. This initiative emphasizes the integration of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) that offer culturally responsive learning experiences, incorporating WIDA standards into Tier 1 writing instruction. Daily support for English learners (ELs) and multilingual (ML) students facilitates access to grade-level texts, utilizing resources such as sentence frames and vocabulary-building imagery. At the same time, the Multilingual Learning Department collaborates with ML educators and classroom teachers through a co-teaching model. Professional development is mandated for secondary teachers to improve instructional practices, focusing on effective time allocation for teacher instruction and student practice across all language domains; however, documentation does not explicitly address job-embedded training for intervention teachers.

## Key Findings: Strengths & Opportunities

### 1.0 Curriculum and Instruction: *Implementation*

#### Grades K-5

The WCPS curriculum aligns with the Maryland College and Career Ready Standards (MCCRS). WCPS uses Amplify's Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) and Amplify CKLA Skills curricular materials. The curriculum strongly focuses on reading, writing, and speaking/listening to ensure student retention of concepts and patterns.

System-wide expectations regarding structured literacy materials and engagement in the skills component of the program are articulated. In focus groups, teachers reported that they found the systematic approach and implementation schedule of the CKLA materials throughout the district important for their students, as some students move from school to school.

The MILE team observed using the newly adopted structured literacy materials with fidelity more consistently in the early grades. For example, PreK-2 teachers explicitly taught children how language works and incorporated reading, writing, and speaking/listening to ensure student retention of concepts and patterns. Additionally, PreK-2 students seemed familiar with CKLA materials and engaged with the program routines, facilitating efficient use of time.

In grades 3-5, the MILE team observed that most teachers used the curriculum with some structures and routines in place. Learning goals could have been more explicit in some classrooms, and student writing performance and engagement could have been improved. There needed to be more checks for understanding in small group instruction and tracking of individual learning goals.

Throughout the grades, the team observed few writing opportunities past representing words or conveying small pieces of information. Additionally, students needed more opportunities to develop comprehension of texts beyond the gist.

#### Grades 6-12

The district has adopted Amplify ELA as the new middle school curriculum and disaggregated student data to inform instructional practices.

The plan emphasizes the integration of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) that provide culturally responsive learning experiences, with WIDA standards applied to Tier 1 writing instruction.

Daily supports and scaffolds are included for English learners (ELs) and multilingual (ML) students, facilitating access to grade-level texts through resources like sentence frames and vocabulary-building imagery.

The Multilingual Learning Department collaborates with ML educators and classroom teachers in a co-teaching model to effectively support all learners.

### 2.0 Professional Learning: *Implementation*

## **Grades K-5**

WCPS provides professional learning opportunities to ensure that teachers and all involved in the literacy development of the children they served understood the reasons for the changes regarding implementation in their classrooms. The district engaged in a thoughtful process for the adoption and roll-out of the CKLA program, including giving teachers significant input on the choice and providing them with all of the materials for half a year before the official roll-out so teachers could try and practice as a risk-free experience.

Teachers had other professionals in their rooms as they were learning the materials to support and collect teachers' impressions of the effectiveness of the materials. Teachers also received training on the curriculum materials. Each school had at least one full day of a CKLA coach. The ELA/Social Studies team also visited the schools with and without the CKLA to support, provide guidance, give feedback, and collect impressions on the materials.

The district also provides monthly professional learning for principals and lead teachers and quarterly professional learning for teachers and staff. Early in 2023-2024, the district mandated a professional learning course on the Science of Reading.

## **Grades 6-12**

Secondary teachers must actively participate in professional learning and job-embedded training to enhance instructional practices. The TNTP coaching document emphasizes the importance of sufficient time for teacher instruction and student practice of targeted skills across reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The plan specifies that teachers will monitor student progress, celebrate those meeting grade-level targets, and collaboratively adjust instruction for students needing additional support. While the Science of Reading (SoR) training is available for grades 4 to 12, the documentation does not explicitly mention job-embedded training for intervention teachers.

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

## **Grades K-5**

WCPS has a comprehensive Multi-tiered Support System that provides data-driven approaches to intervention and opportunities for differentiation. WCPS reviews trend data to monitor alignment and correlate local and state assessments. Building administrators and teachers use data to track progress toward the School Improvement Goal for Literacy system-wide. All students read at or above grade level by 3rd grade and continue reading at or above.

WCPS assessments consist of screening, diagnostic, formative, and summative measures. WCPS uses DIBELS to assess letter naming fluency, phonemic segmentation, and nonsense word fluency. The district uses extensive MTSS architecture, such as literacy assessment, the 'If/Then' document, and the "4As Process for Supplemental Instruction" (Assess, Analyze, Act, Adjust). The district utilizes a series of systems and structures to facilitate collaborative analysis of and responsiveness to student progress, including monthly and weekly data meetings between lead teachers and teachers to monitor student progress and ensure that students meet grade level targets.

Monthly professional development sessions are provided to school-based special education case managers, focusing on the five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics,

fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as assessment literacy and the connection of effective reading interventions to these components. The district's special education and English Language Arts (ELA) leadership teams work collaboratively to establish common language, messaging, and expectations for supporting students with reading difficulties. This initiative is grounded in the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), ensuring that all students receive high-quality Tier 1 instruction and appropriate Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions as necessary. Professional learning opportunities for reading interventionist teachers include job-embedded coaching on research-based practices, after-school sessions on the application of the Science of Reading, focus groups discussing best practices for Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, and training on how to assist Tier 2 and Tier 3 students during Tier 1 instruction. Content specialists participate in school-based quarterly meetings at each elementary school to review the progress of students with disabilities (SWD) and address any concerns regarding students who are not making adequate progress.

### **Grades 6-12**

All student groups benefit from Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies incorporated in the high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). The 2023-2024 plan includes disaggregated data for students in grades K-8 and 10 and a separate document outlining detailed plans for the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) for middle and high school. Monthly professional development sessions for school-based special education case managers focus on the five components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—alongside assessment literacy and effective reading interventions. The district's special education and English Language Arts leadership teams collaborate to establish a common framework for supporting students with reading difficulties. This ensures that all students receive high-quality Tier 1 instruction, with Tier 2 and 3 support as necessary. Professional learning for reading intervention teachers encompasses job-embedded coaching, after-school sessions on applying the Science of Reading, focus groups on best practices, and strategies for supporting Tier 2 and 3 students during Tier 1 instruction. Additionally, content specialists participate in quarterly meetings with school leadership teams to monitor the progress of students with disabilities and address any concerns related to their academic advancement.

## **4.0 Instructional Leadership: *Sustainment***

### **Grades K-5**

WCPS administrators collaborate on instructional practices aligned to the SoR and implementation of CKLA through District Literacy Learning Labs. Additionally, Monthly Leadership Council sessions support the WCPS literacy vision.

The WCPS Literacy Comprehension and Reading Foundational Skills Coaching Tool supports professional learning for school leaders, lead teachers, and teachers, collects evidence of research-based practices during classroom visits, and conveys the district's vision of high-quality instruction.

Additionally, the district utilizes surveys to collect data about learning opportunities, improve professional learning and communication, and promote the vision of high-quality literacy instruction. The Early Warning Systems document identifies explicit areas of literacy comprehension to identify students in need.

Additional factors such as attendance, behavior, and course performance are suggested to improve early intervention strategies and ensure that Tier 1 instruction promotes a thorough understanding of students' individual needs. The document explicitly mentions Science of Reading (SoR) training, aligning with the district's literacy vision. The district's primary objective is to support the effective implementation of the newly adopted High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM).

### **Grades 6-12**

The plan outlines the facilitation of monthly professional development (PD) sessions for principals and leadership teams, along with quarterly PD for teachers and staff, focusing on data analysis to identify trends among disaggregated student populations. A coaching tool supports job-embedded professional learning for educators, complemented by a well-detailed assessment calendar that aligns with scheduled data meetings established before the school year's commencement. A standardized eight-period schedule for grades 6-12 is proposed to facilitate collaborative planning, supplemental instruction, and intervention. Additionally, the inclusion of a CKLA walkthrough document suggests a "curriculum agnostic" approach, with targeted initiatives designed to bolster instructional leadership in the implementation of new Tier 1 strategies and support for the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) in Tier 2 and 3 interventions.

## **5.0 Community Culture and Engagement: *Sustainment***

### **Grades K-5**

WCPS meets regularly with stakeholders to ensure representative groups understand MSDE and CCPSD initiatives, including Blueprint and SoR-related topics. The Washington County Comprehensive Literacy Action Plan 2023-2024 contains action items for all members of the internal school community, including district leaders, school leaders, lead teachers, and teachers.

WCPS provided the following resources in the implementation of its literacy plan:

- Instructional resources online
- Data evenings
- Literacy Nights
- Free book programs
- A lending library in front of schools
- A newsletter with readings and a focus on thematic units

Teachers and administrators reported that the community was excited about the improvement they saw in student achievement.

### **Grades 6-12**

The "Action Items for All Key Stakeholders" document outlines the subsequent steps necessary to effectively implement the literacy plan, involving district leaders, school administrators, lead teachers, and classroom educators. Specific roles and responsibilities for each group are delineated on pages 5 to 7. Resources will be provided for caregivers through a dedicated website to support the overarching vision. Additionally, feedback collected from the Leadership Council, leadership team meetings, and Communities of Practice (CoPs) will be utilized to refine the tools and resources that align with this vision. The climate and culture survey will be analyzed three times yearly to assess progress and inform improvements.



## Recommendations: Next Steps

### 1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

#### Grades K-5

While the implementation of CKLA is in its first year, the level of consistency and the quality of enactment is high. In particular, students in the primary grades are highly engaged in a rigorous academic schedule. More significant challenges with implementation appear in the intermediary grades. MILE acknowledges that the limited time spent in grades 3-5 classrooms may impact “the evidence collected and implications drawn for instructional improvement.” We recommended that in grades 3-5, lesson design and implementation be more structured to ensure the rigor of tasks, the pacing of lessons, opportunities for frequent and varied differentiated learning, and explicit reading and writing instruction. Additionally, teachers may leverage the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students to activate existing knowledge.

#### Grades 6-12

The literacy plan includes specific support mechanisms for English learners, highlighting the importance of teacher training in effective instructional strategies.

To enhance student learning, instructional plans should incorporate direct vocabulary instruction, word awareness, synonyms and context cues, and morphological awareness.

### 2.0 Professional Learning

#### Grades K-12

We recommend that all PreK-5 teachers take the SoR Course.

Additionally, we recommend that professional development support implementing foundational skills through explicit instruction in grade 3-5 classrooms. The district may also consider how the professional learning cultures differ between the elementary and intermediary grades.

The district should create and implement plans ensuring that all students receive explicit instruction in text structure, engage in extended discussions of complex texts, and develop comprehension strategies such as summarizing, identifying main ideas, and drawing inferences.

The secondary training document needs explicit instruction on Science of Reading (SoR) topics, and the alignment with clear vertical goals needs to be established.

The current coaching document may not be utilized by support staff or teachers conducting interventions or specific lesson components. However, the progress monitoring document includes prompts for assessing these instructional components.



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

#### **Grades K-12**

We recommend that WCPS support teachers with explicit mini-lessons on language for Tier 1 instruction in grades 3-5 to increase student proficiency, given the wide range of student learning needs at the intermediate level and lower fidelity to the curriculum compared to the primary grades.

While small groups did provide students with teacher models, we recommend that for Tier 2 instruction, a system be established for recording how students were progressing towards the learning goal, corrective feedback be used, and the range of learning needs among the students at the table be addressed.

We recommend that the district clarify whether the DIBELS screening and progress monitoring in primary grades should be utilized for the students who are currently not proficient in grades 3-5 and to identify students who would benefit from additional support.

It is essential to provide teachers with professional development focused on the independent application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies and an understanding of the recommendations offered by the online curriculum. Furthermore, the district should implement measures to reduce group sizes and increase the intensity of intervention dosage for students receiving Tier II and Tier III support, facilitating more effective, individualized intervention.

### **4.0 Instructional Leadership**

#### **Grades K-12**

School leaders vary in how they find time for teachers to plan and collaborate. We recommend that WCPS establish a network for school leadership to discuss how some of these practices and structures could be shared so that more teachers have access to additional time and resources.

Additionally, we recommend that the district continue to refine and sustain the CLP and focus on data accompanied by specific instructional supports (MTSS) to ensure sustainability, particularly in grades 3-5.

It is essential to ensure that data meetings lead to student-centered adjustments and facilitate consistent progress monitoring of student performance.

Secondary data planning meetings should prioritize discussions on trends among disaggregated student populations to inform targeted interventions.

A coaching tool has been provided to school leaders at all levels to support alignment in instructional practices. Support staff and interventionists should consider utilizing this tool to effectively enhance student outcomes.

## **5.0 Community Culture and Engagement**

### **Grades K-12**

We recommend that WCPS explore how families and communities can be partners in the instructional core.

Assessing the effectiveness of various intervention types is important to enhance student engagement and ensure transparency in the process.

The timing and consistency of community involvement in the intervention process remain unclear, necessitating further clarification.

While the plan mentions providing resources for families to support the district's vision, it needs more clarity on how families understand and interpret the information on the website, particularly for middle and high school students.

Consider organizing events that facilitate families' and students' understanding of data, fostering a more informed partnership in the educational process.

