LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Wicomico 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 joint collaboration with MILE and AIM Institute for Learning & Research. 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 Wicomico County Public School District 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 and updated in May 2024. Two literacy experts reviewed this plan using a standard rubric developed for the purpose. After the review, the literacy experts provided both written and oral feedback to the Wicomico County Public School District 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 18 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. Seven classroom observations were conducted in April 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 15 or 45 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.

Introductory Statement

Wicomico County Public School District (WCPS) embraces a comprehensive approach to literacy embedded in the Science of Reading (SoR) research and structured literacy principles. The literacy vision of the district is to ensure that instruction is relevant, culturally responsive, and taught with high expectations, where every student can develop foundational skills and knowledge through a variety of complex texts and engage in evidence-based writing. The Comprehensive Literacy Plan (CLP) is set to provide all district stakeholders with a clear understanding of the literacy vision and implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction. WCPS leaders have implemented the CLP since 2022. The district's ELA leadership has established a strong framework for ensuring that evidence-aligned, high-quality instructional materials for foundational skills, comprehension, and knowledge-building are utilized with fidelity. However, the sustainability of these efforts may be in jeopardy as current resources shift.

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**, WCPS demonstrates a strong alignment of its curriculum with Maryland standards, utilizing evidence-aligned programs like Heggerty and 95% curriculum across K-5. MILE observed a strong emphasis on core foundational skills, alphabetic, and content knowledge from K-5 and system-wide expectations for daily writing using Fishtank and focused time on phonics and phonemic awareness. Teachers preferred traditional and previously used reading approaches, highlighting a potential gap in understanding and implementing structured literacy practices, particularly for foundational skills and fluency. **Professional Learning** opportunities are robust, including LETRS training for PK-5 teachers and instructional coaches, regular use of TNTP walk-throughs and collaborative coaching cycles, monthly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to analyze assessment data and inform instructional planning, and support structures like literacy coaches providing co-teaching, modeling, and grade-level support. WCPS faces the challenge of maintaining consistency, especially in non-Title I schools with limited resources. **Multi-tiered support Systems** show promise regarding the implementation of Tier 2 and Tier 3, the use of i-Ready and Phonics Screener for Intervention as diagnostic assessments, flexible grouping for Foundations I Need (FIN) groups based on specific skill needs and systems for collaborative data analysis and responsiveness to student progress. The system might require clearer guidelines for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, especially for readers in grades 4 and 5, as well as enhanced support for English Learners and students with disabilities. **Instructional Leadership** efforts and involvement involve the development of plans by administrators to address barriers and support key initiatives, which includes analysis of intervention effectiveness and resources for multilingual learners (MLs). Creating systems such as Walk Through protocols could benefit from increased focus. **Community Engagement** efforts involve regular engagement with stakeholder groups to communicate initiatives and updates, which includes family engagement events and initiatives to support student learning at home. However, efforts to keep parents informed about student learning, though consistent, vary across schools. It may be of benefit to standardize impactful literacy engagement strategies district-wide.

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 being in the mode of *Implementing* around the key driver for Curriculum and Instruction and *Sustaining* around Professional Development, Professional Learning, Multi-tiered Systems of Support, Instructional Leadership, and Community Engagement. Recommendations include aligning curricular approaches, enhancing professional development for structured literacy, clarifying intervention strategies, bolstering

instructional leadership support, and standardizing community engagement efforts for equitable impact.

Secondary

District leaders collaborate with administrators, teachers, and community stakeholders to analyze assessment data and evaluate the performance of diverse learner subgroups. A comprehensive plan is being developed to train all teachers in grades 6-12 in LETRS Volume 1 and Volume 2, with a particular emphasis on the Science of Reading and specialized training for English Language Arts (ELA) and multilingual educators. Ongoing literacy data analysis will be conducted through platforms such as iReady, Read 180, and Achieve 3000, with a transparent assessment calendar distributed to stakeholders before the school year to enhance communication regarding the Evidence of Learning Timeline. The district's commitment to establishing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is underscored by the use of targeted intervention programs, such as Achieve 3000 and Read 180, alongside systematic monitoring of intervention data to ensure that students, particularly those in targeted subgroups, achieve academic success.

Key Findings: Strengths & Opportunities

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction: *Implementing*

Grades K-5

WCPS curriculum is aligned with the Maryland College and Career Ready Standards (MCCRS). WCPS uses Heggerty and Connect 4 Learning for K-5 for PreK, 95% CORE Phonics, Heggerty, 95% Chip Kits, and 95% Phonics Lesson Library for K-5. The curriculum generally follows evidence-aligned principles of structured literacy. The system uses Fishtank to focus on background knowledge, comprehension, writing, and cultural diversity through authentic texts. The curriculum has strong core foundational skills, knowledge building and comprehension, alphabetics, and content knowledge.

System-wide expectations regarding the time spent on phonics, phonemic awareness, and Foundations I Need time are clearly articulated. The plan indicates a daily focus on writing using Fishtank (K-5). The MILE team observed integrated use of Fishtank, Heggerty, and 95%.

Despite the curriculum providing resources for multilingual learners (MLs), focus groups reported limited scaffolding and instructional materials for MLs or students with disabilities. Teachers also reported that time spent on foundational skills such as phonics and phonemic awareness took away from time spent on vocabulary and comprehension. Focus groups also reported no independent reading time for students in K-3 and no opportunity to practice fluency through authentic texts.

Grades 6-12

The curriculum adheres to the county's guidelines, utilizing culturally responsive units derived from StudySync. Furthermore, it has been adapted to better serve English learners by incorporating culturally relevant practices and materials.

The instructional goals focus on enhancing grade-level proficiency by providing explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills, alongside robust vocabulary practices. Opportunities For the embedded implementation of evidence-based literacy strategies through a variety of texts and tasks.

The instructional approach to enrich students' knowledge and vocabulary via comprehensive lessons involves intensive reading and authentic writing experiences. Daily writing instruction is emphasized, offering students numerous opportunities to develop effective communication skills. Grammar instruction encompasses text-based writing, on-demand writing, and the writing process.

2.0 Professional Learning: *Sustaining*

Grades K-5

WCPS provides a multipronged approach to professional learning opportunities. The district provided initial LETRS training for PK-5 teachers and instructional coaches, with one LETRS-certified instructional coach providing ongoing support. The comprehensive literacy plan detailed that all personnel participate in TNTP walk-throughs utilizing the Literacy Comprehension Observation Tool and Foundational Skills Tool. Teachers and instructional coaches also have collaborative coaching cycles where data is reviewed and teacher needs are addressed. Monthly professional learning communities also address grade-level needs and analyze all assessment data to inform planning and instruction.

Teachers and administrators highlighted evidence of system-wide LETRS training for all K-5 teachers in Wicomico County Public Schools. Instructional assistants and other support staff have also been trained. Focus groups reported a range of professional opportunities available for teachers: new teacher mentors, monthly PLCs, literacy coaches offering co-teaching, modeling, grade-level planning and support, and data meetings. Coaches lead teachers through a two-hour introduction/planning session before the beginning of each new whole-group reading unit.

Teachers reported that 95% of curriculum training was provided during its implementation and that new teachers receive it at the beginning of the year. They also reported that coaches receive and provide curriculum training to instructional assistants and teachers, especially with the new reading curriculum being implemented this year. Teachers also get school-based professional development. Focus group discussions highlighted how 95% of training was fully implemented two years ago. Last year, the district provided some consultant support; this year, there hasn't been much training on 95%. There are fewer opportunities for professional development and support for new teachers and others who were not trained in the initial rollout.

Veteran teachers shared that they are responsible for supporting new hires fresh out of teacher education programs regarding curriculum. There is a need for more literacy instruction in teacher education programs and an introduction to key examples of literacy curricula/programs. Facilitating monthly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) centered on data analysis, including local assessments, progress monitoring, and curriculum assessments.

Grades 6-12
Ongoing literacy data analysis and PD sessions will be conducted using the iReady platform, occurring three times annually in collaboration with instructional coaches. Literacy data analysis will include the Read 180 and Achieve 3000 platforms, engaging reading intervention teachers, and selected classroom educators. Analyzing individual school data and student needs will guide allocating resources, including instructional materials, human resources for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, and stipends for collaborative planning among teachers and support staff. New educators in Wicomico County Public Schools will observe highly effective tenured teachers during the English Language Arts (ELA) block, followed by reflective sessions with professional development coaches. Bi-weekly planning sessions with content coaches will be organized for non-tenured teachers to provide targeted, individualized professional development.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems: *Sustaining*

Grades K-5

WCPS Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction provides opportunities for differentiation.

WCPS reviews trend data to monitor alignment and correlate local and state assessments. Building administrators and teachers utilize data to identify specific skill needs, structure Foundations I Need (FIN) groups, and screen and identify student progress and struggling reading.

WCPS assessments consist of screening, diagnostic, formative, and summative measures. Over the past year, WCPS has used i-Ready and Phonics Screener for Intervention as diagnostic assessments. The district uses i-Ready 3x/year to screen and identify student progress and struggling reading as identified by the Ready to Read Act. The district uses i-Ready and Phonics Screener for Intervention to identify specific skill needs for intervention every 4 to 5 weeks. Additionally, the district utilizes a series of systems and structures to facilitate collaborative analysis of and responsiveness to student progress, including a) intervention curriculum and CHIP KITS materials training, b) data dives with coaches 3x/year to walk through the data, form groups for FIN time, and provide resources for instruction, and c) Walk to Intervention.

Teachers use flexible grouping to structure Foundations I Need groups to support specific learning objectives and skills based on students' skill needs. Once their skill needs are addressed, students can move out of the intervention group. Focus groups reported that limited staffing of interventionists, reading specialists, and instructional assistants was a common barrier to implementation, with non-Title I schools having low staff-to-student ratios. For example, one school reported one interventionist for 500 students. Teachers also reported feeling they could only partially address needs in the time allotted for intervention blocks and the need for more diverse materials and training for serving EML populations in intervention, especially for students who speak languages other than Spanish.

Grades 6-12

Systematic monitoring of intervention data will be implemented to ensure that students, particularly targeted subgroups, are achieving success. Classroom teachers, intervention staff, special education (SPED), and multilingual (ML) educators will provide remediation and enrichment based on local assessment data.

Establishing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a key district goal. Achieve 3000 and Read 180 have been designated intervention programs for secondary students.

All K-12 educators will undergo training in LETRS Volume 1 and 2 and Science of Reading (SoR) training. Additionally, semester-based interventions will be provided alongside Tier I core instruction, targeting specific skills for groups of students based on screening data. Tier III interventions will be conducted for 40 minutes daily in high school using Achieve 3000 and 45 minutes on alternating days in middle school using Read 180 and Achieve 3000.

4.0 Instructional Leadership: *Sustaining*

Grades K-5

WCPS administrators develop plans to remedy barriers and amplify key initiatives. For example, teachers in Walk to Intervention schools felt that administrators worked hard to make scheduling work for their schools so that they could implement this program.

Teachers and interventionists reported needing more support from administrators to improve the effectiveness of intervention time and provide resources for MLs.

Grades 6-12
A comprehensive plan will be developed to train all teachers in grades 6-12 in LETRS Volume 1 and Volume 2, focusing on the Science of Reading. This plan will also encompass training specifically for English Language Arts (ELA) and multilingual (ML) educators. Ongoing literacy data analysis and professional development will be conducted through platforms such as iReady, Read 180, and Achieve 3000, with an assessment calendar released to all stakeholders prior to the school year, ensuring transparency regarding the Evidence of Learning Timeline. Local diagnostic and state data will be presented to the Board of Education to highlight trends and disaggregate data. At the same time, walkthroughs will be conducted to evaluate specific indicators using the Reading Foundational Skills Observation Tool and the Literacy Comprehension Observation Tool. Collaborative meetings will be held with administrators, teachers, and community stakeholders to analyze assessment data and the performance of various student subgroups, supplemented by a School Climate Survey distributed to families to encourage participation. Additionally, data monitoring will occur at least three times a year to identify trends and provide updates to the instructional leadership team (ILT) plan and associated strategies.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement: *Sustaining*

Grades K-5
WCPS meets regularly with stakeholders to ensure representative groups understand MSDE and WCPS initiatives, including Blueprint and SoR-related topics.

WCPS instituted the following initiatives in the implementation of its literacy plan:
- Family engagement events
- Sending materials home to support student and family learning
- Schools working
- to keep parents up to date on what students are learning and how they could support their children at home

District leaders collaborate with administrators, teachers, and community stakeholders to analyze assessment data collaboratively and examine the performance of various learner subgroups. Parent University events will be organized to promote literacy education and disseminate best practices for at-home implementation.

Additionally, plans will be developed to coordinate family events specifically for multilingual (ML) families. The School Climate Survey will be distributed to all families and actively encouraged to participation. The data from the survey will be analyzed to identify trends and inform key initiatives within the district.

Grades 6-12
District leaders collaborate with administrators, teachers, and community stakeholders to analyze assessment data and evaluate the performance of various learner subgroups. They organize Parent University events focusing on literacy education and best practices for families to implement at home. Additionally, plans are made to coordinate events tailored specifically for multilingual (ML) families. The School Climate Survey is distributed to all families to encourage participation, and its findings are analyzed to identify trends related to key initiatives.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

While Heggerty and 95% are evidence-aligned solid programs, Fishtank derives from a more balanced literacy focus and does not involve foundational skills. Teachers indicated that they gravitate toward the traditional balanced literacy approaches, and lessons observed by the MILE team were primarily related to the Fishtank curriculum.

We recommend that WCPS address alignment between these curricula and provide strong guiding materials for lesson planning, particularly in writing and fluency. Instructional coaches may aid in developing implementation plans in the CLP.

Additionally, we recommend that greater teacher buy-in of explicit, structured literacy practices be encouraged during professional learning so that instruction is meaningful to teachers and impactful for students' literacy development.

Grades 6-12

The current framework needs to explicitly address incorporating context clues and morphological knowledge in vocabulary instruction. Developing specific training programs for educators that emphasize explicit vocabulary instruction is imperative. Instructional leaders must guarantee that all secondary educators deliver effective vocabulary instruction across various content areas.

Additionally, concrete plans should be established to ensure that students receive explicit instruction in text structure and are afforded opportunities to learn strategies for comprehending complex texts. Extended discussions should also be facilitated to deepen students' understanding of the material.

Moreover, the district should delineate clear writing objectives across grade levels, integrating writing instruction into all content areas to promote comprehensive literacy development.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

While WCPS coaches are valued, they are often stretched across schools and responsible for many classrooms. This is partially driven by differences between Title I and non-Title I-funded schools. The level of support for continued professional learning in the manner that has been introduced needs to be maintained. We recommend that continued professional development address the needs of teachers, particularly novice teachers, to support successful implementation without burdening veteran teachers. Additionally, we recommend that professional development provide a full picture of structured literacy and integrate the

foundational skills and knowledge-building curricula to clarify for teachers and support teacher agency. We recommend that training support the instruction of ML students as this population is expanding, and there is a limited number of trained ML teachers for extensive pull-out or push-in opportunities. Establishing a feedback model that assesses participants' levels of support and their perceptions of equity in that support is essential. Data meetings involving coaches, teachers, and support staff should lead to informed decisions regarding the adjustment of instructional time and intensity. Furthermore, a differentiated professional development plan must be developed to address the varying needs of intervention providers and content area teachers, allowing for collaborative strategizing. Lastly, a systematic plan should be implemented to support intervention providers, incorporating a feedback cycle to facilitate continuous improvement in instructional practices.

Grades 6-12

To enhance instructional effectiveness, it is essential to ensure that data meetings involving coaches, teachers, and support staff lead to informed decisions regarding the adjustment of instructional time and intensity. Additionally, establishing a feedback model is crucial to assess participants' perceptions of the support received and its equity. It is important to clarify the accountability mechanisms for school leaders and district staff in providing instructional coaches with the necessary training and resources to train teachers effectively. Furthermore, a comprehensive plan should be developed to differentiate professional development needs, allowing adequate time for intervention providers and content area teachers to strategize collaboratively. Lastly, creating a structured support plan for intervention providers and a robust feedback cycle will facilitate ongoing improvement in instructional practices.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

Grades K-5

Given the differences between schools in Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention support, we recommend that WCPS include details of UDL approaches available in the district and how to access those resources in the comprehensive literacy plan.

Wicomico County Public Schools provided additional evidence*: "One example of guidance for Tier 2 and 3 intervention is included in the Comprehensive Literacy Plan (Elementary RTI Flowchart)."*

Additionally, we recommend that the district clarify what Tier 2 and Tier 3 look like in grades 4 and 5 and whether general education teachers or interventionists/IAs in schools with fewer interventionists provide Tier 3 support.

Grades 6-12

Conduct an assessment to determine whether the designated intervention programs

adequately address the diverse needs of all students. Identify alternative programs, if necessary, that may more effectively cater to students' individualized requirements. Establish appropriate group sizes for intervention to optimize the effectiveness of instructional support.

4.0 Instructional Leadership

Grades K-5
Literacy leadership has been strong in the district. We recommend that the WCPS support ELA leaders in maintaining the intensity of professional learning needed. The staff support around MTSS, and multilingual learners will ensure success in achieving the district's literacy goals.

Develop and implement short-, mid-, and long-term goals to enhance educational outcomes, specifically by training all 6-12 educators in LETRS Volume 1 and 2 and the Science of Reading.

Grades 6-12

Create a specialized training plan for all 6-12 English Language Arts (ELA) and multilingual (ML) teachers in LETRS Volume 1 and 2 to ensure effective literacy instruction. Engage in continuous literacy data analysis and professional development using iReady, Read 180, and Achieve 3000. Additionally, the assessment calendar should be released to all stakeholders prior to the school year (Evidence of Learning Timeline). Local diagnostic and state data will be presented to the Board of Education to highlight trends and disaggregated data, with regular monitoring of this data to inform updates and revisions to the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) plan and strategies at least three times annually.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement

Grades K-5
We recommend that WCPS consider creating a standard set of expectations and resources around literacy nights for all schools in the district. Sharing logistics and resources developed in the Title I schools with the other buildings or holding joint events may be viable opportunities.

Grades 6-12
To ensure fidelity in implementing Science of Reading (SoR) initiatives, it is important to outline explicit methods for monitoring adherence to these practices. Additionally, a detailed plan should be provided regarding the frequency with which families will be informed about relevant updates and initiatives. It would be beneficial to identify the online features available for accessibility and specific interventions tailored to secondary families. Furthermore, clarity

is needed on how equity gaps are analyzed within survey data and the methods employed to invite parental feedback beyond the School Climate Survey.