



LEA Final Report

Local Education Agency	Worcester 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 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.

The Worcester 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 experts provided written and oral feedback to Worcester 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. After the review, the experts provided written and oral feedback to Worcester County Public Schools to revise the plan.

Focus Groups

Two teacher focus groups, several individual interviews, and one principal focus group were conducted to review literacy implementation across the district. Twenty 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 used to observe literacy implementation across the district. 11 classroom observations were conducted in May 2024 to provide data on literacy implementation in classrooms. 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 10 and 45 minutes. LEA staff members were present during classroom observations.



LEA Background and Context

The Worcester County Public School District (WCPS) has embraced a vision and mission for literacy: "committed to providing each student daily literacy instruction that is intentional, equitable, and inclusive," with a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction focused on essential skills and knowledge building. The district leadership and ELA coordinators developed a well-detailed, ambitious Comprehensive Literacy Plan (CLP). Based upon a district survey, 80% of teachers, leaders, and stakeholders agree with the WCPS literacy vision, curricula, and plans for professional learning. The district's goals are to ensure that 95% of kindergartners and 80% of 1st and 2nd graders will achieve proficiency rates and decrease the number of at-risk students to 5% in the coming school year. In the 2023-24 school year, the number of students not meeting the benchmark from the beginning of the year (BOY) to the end of the year (EOY) dropped from 72%-28% in 1st grade, 62%-22% in 2nd grade, 49%-21% in 3rd grade, 58%-34% in 4th grade, and 64-47% in 5th grade suggesting that the changes implemented are having an impact.

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 has aligned its curriculum with Maryland standards with the implementation programs for foundational skills and knowledge building, comprehension, and integrated writing and implementation. The district is moving from using five separate curricula, which has been reportedly untenable, to adopting a new single curriculum for knowledge-building and comprehension and continuing with the foundational skills program for K-2. These programs are rich in diverse text and provide scaffolds for multilingual learners (MLs). **Professional Learning** opportunities are robust and include LETRS training for K-5 teachers. Literacy education is supported through regular training sessions provided by vendors, who provide opportunities for support from reading specialists/coaches who collaborate with staff in planning, data analysis, and intervention support. However, teachers and administrators have noted how the loss of these supports in light of budgetary challenges is already impacting implementation, particularly for ML students and those with disabilities. WCPS has a well-developed model for **Multi-tiered Support Systems** with a robust data-driven process, including differentiation, push-in and pull-out instruction, and one-on-one teacher-student conferences. Assessments from DIBELS and iReady are used for screening, assessment, and progress monitoring, and data systems like mClass are used to identify student needs. The greatest challenge is planning time for teachers with literacy coaches to review data and provide the necessary Tier II/III interventions and training for teachers in utilizing Tier II/III intervention programs. **Instructional Leadership** from central administration to school leadership is an area that is under development for the district as the central office is in a phase of planning and preparing to unveil processes and procedures in the next year. Currently, teachers described having a great deal of autonomy and relying heavily on literacy coaches, which translates into burdens on planning and implementation. School leaders are involved in professional learning, assessment, and intervention, ensuring implementation fidelity through walk-throughs. **Community Engagement** in WCPS is active and involves literacy events for families, home learning

materials, and updates on student learning. Teachers and administrators spoke highly of the efforts of schools to reach out to families and communities.

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 **adoption/preparation** in the key drivers of Curriculum and Instruction and Multi-tiered support systems, given the nature of the new curriculum and the retooling of the Tiers of instruction. The district is in a transition period of **preparation/early implementation** for Professional Learning, Instructional Leadership, and full **implementation** for Community Engagement. The leadership at WCPS has made great strides in the past year to begin this journey. They will need strong support to continue on this path in light of changing fiscal support from ESSER funds.

Secondary

The district's plan outlines the establishment of an ELA Committee for grades 6-12, supported by strategy team members, to facilitate the effective implementation of the adopted curriculum. A selection committee will evaluate instructional resources to ensure they provide an objective and balanced perspective of all student groups, free from bias and stereotypes. Additionally, the district aims to optimize MyPerspectives Multilingual Learner Resources to deliver embedded classroom support for multilingual students, with a focus on foundational skills through research-based programs such as Foundations and Heggerty, while integrating high-quality instructional materials that foster language comprehension and critical thinking within a structured literacy block. Furthermore, the district is committed to launching Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for ongoing professional development in Summer 2024, wherein coaches will assist teachers with curriculum implementation and data analysis while supporting literacy lab teachers in their transition to curricular leadership roles utilizing updated Savvas curricula.

Key Findings: Current Status of Implementation

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction: *Adoption/Preparation*

Grades K-5

Currently, five literacy curricula are implemented, and teachers report that they need to be more connected, making alignment of instruction to best evidence-based practices difficult. Adopting a new curriculum (Wit and Wisdom) for the coming 2024-25 school year provides an opportunity to improve alignment to evidence-based literacy practices and align the intervention curriculum to the core curriculum. Teachers report that they are excited about the new comprehensive curriculum.

During the visits, reviewers observed explicit phonics instruction in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, which included gradual release, targeting phonemic awareness, and immediate feedback during decoding practice.

Reviewers observed explicit language comprehension instruction in third and fourth grade that was horizontally aligned and included student practice in responding to questions by using evidence from the text, responding to inferential questions with scaffolds, and opportunities to build student’s background knowledge through the use of current topic, high-quality texts; and the use of context aligned text to develop relevant background knowledge and fluency simultaneously.

Writing integration was observed across all grade levels during the site visit, with individual student goal-setting built into that time.

Teachers mentioned that the independent reading block was challenging for students without fundamentals. However, we observed teachers pulling individual students to work on skills during this, but we are still determining if it is systematic.

Teachers mentioned a resource gap or finding resources supporting multiple needs within the curriculum.

Focus group and classroom observations identified that culturally responsive instruction is not happening daily and that some professional development is happening around cultural responsiveness, but it is school-dependent.

The district plans to enhance support for multilingual learners (ML) by utilizing MyPerspectives Multilingual Learner Resources and optimizing ML teacher schedules for classroom support. Comprehension, vocabulary, speaking, listening, and writing are developed through high-quality instructional materials, MyPerspectives, for grades 6-12. The literacy block for grades 6-12 includes 70-120 minutes of Integrated English Language Arts instruction, plus an additional 45 minutes for targeted support, featuring close reading and daily writing to engage students with complex texts and promote critical thinking.

Grades 6-12

The district’s plan indicates that grades 6-12 will leverage an ELA Committee, augmented by strategy team members, to ensure the effective implementation of the adopted curriculum. A selection committee will evaluate instructional resources to ensure they represent an objective and balanced perspective of all student groups, free from bias and stereotypes. Additionally, the district plans to optimize MyPerspectives Multilingual Learner Resources to provide embedded classroom support for multilingual students, emphasizing foundational skills through research-based programs like Foundations and Heggerty while integrating high-quality instructional materials that promote language comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking through a structured literacy block.

2.0 Professional Learning: Adoption/Early Implementation

Grades K-5

Focus group discussions highlighted that the district offers a range of professional development opportunities (instruction, work sessions in teams, learning walks, observations, coaches, and feedback by consultants (School Kit, The New Teachers Project (TNTP)) that are very carefully planned and integrated into instructional practice.

Intervention specialists and coaches provide extensive support to teachers in several areas, such as data reviews, lesson coaching, and targeting specific needs. Literacy coaches receive professional development in several different areas around structured literacy and support teachers (train the trainer model). The coaches are seen as valuable by new and veteran teachers and administrators. They offer several different supports, including elbow-to-elbow training, modeling, lesson planning, and student groups - lots of flexible yet structured supports. However, it was reported that access to coaches varied between schools, with Title I schools having access to coaches compared to non-Title I schools.

The district mentioned that ongoing funding for professional development is a challenge. Therefore, specific cohorts of teachers or interventionists are trained in LETRS and Orton Gillingham, but system-wide training has yet to be provided. Based on reports from focus groups, there is a collaborative approach to professional learning where it is lacking (across and within schools). Teachers work together to align instruction to the Science of Reading. Coaches hold professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers work together and learn about structured literacy, lesson modeling, study groups, and targeting instruction for students' needs. Administrators mentioned the challenge of new teachers (graduating from Maryland teacher education programs) needing more training to teach foundational skills, placing the burden on the school system to provide basic knowledge of foundational skills and structured literacy approaches.

Administrators reported being concerned about new mandates for interventionists and multi-tiered support for learners, for which districts cannot provide financial support.

Grades 6-12

The district has committed to establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a mechanism for ongoing professional development starting in Summer 2024, emphasizing that coaches will assist teachers with curriculum implementation and data analysis related to formative and summative assessments in the forthcoming school year. Additionally, Washington County Public Schools (WCPS) will support literacy lab teachers in grades 6-12 as they deepen their understanding of the Science of Reading and transition into curricular leadership roles within their schools, utilizing the updated Savvas curricula. The district also plans to use the current academic year to refine the literacy intervention handbook and enhance related professional development opportunities.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems: *Adoption/Preparation*

Grades K-5

During focus groups, teachers mentioned a robust data-based approach to intervention. This is made possible through collaboration between interventionists and teachers around data. Screening, assessment, and progress monitoring include several data points, including writing, Ready to Read, iReady, and DIBELS. Teachers reported that iReady was a “major source” for data-based decision-making in the district.

Based on data collected every 5 to 6 weeks, student groupings are highly flexible, and teachers can adapt intervention programs to meet their school's and student's needs. Strong instructional intervention practices were observed using programs including

Orton-Gillingham, Wilson, and Just Words. However, focus groups reported a disconnect between Tier I (Core) instruction and Tier II/Tier III approaches.

Teacher focus groups reported that schools without intervention specialists (or enough) are using general education teachers to direct the intervention programming—one school has one intervention specialist for 640 students. Some general education teachers reported not being trained in the specific intervention curriculum or progress monitoring tools. Thus, intervention fidelity is limited due to funding, staffing, and training.

While Tier III interventions occur particularly in small groups, teachers and administrators noted that some students need more support. Teachers reported significant gaps in intervention materials, leading them to curate their resources out of necessity and modify Tier I materials to fit needs that aren't serviced in Tier III.

Administrators reported that intervention block time is guarded and non-negotiable, even on half days. Teachers interviewed agreed that a more extended block of time for literacy instruction is needed.

Grades 6-12

The district implements the iReady assessment for students in grades 1 through 10, alongside core curriculum embedded formative and summative assessments across all grade levels (K-12). The plan outlines multiple data points for secondary education to place students appropriately within intervention programs. Furthermore, all literacy curriculum materials are designed to incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. The district is actively developing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) throughout the current academic year, with a data protocol integral to this evolving framework; students in grades 6-12 receive 70-120 minutes of English Language Arts instruction, supplemented by an additional 45 minutes for targeted support, focusing on foundational skills, comprehension, writing, and small group instruction. The sole intervention available for students requiring Tier 3 support is the Wilson Reading System (WRS) or the Orton-Gillingham (OG) approach. The implementation plan includes disaggregated data to track student progress, and students in grades 9 and 10 who are struggling academically are enrolled in the iReady course for additional support.

4.0 Instructional Leadership: Adoption/Early Implementation

Grades K-5

Strong administrator facilitation of collaboration between teachers, interventionists, and special area teachers and a strong focus on data-driven decision-making and systematic data review. Teachers and coaches discussed that “learning walks” and observations were happening across the district, with coaches and consultants to provide feedback. Autonomy and collaboration were common discussion points in focus groups; however, this autonomy lens was also perceived as placing more responsibility on teachers to fill the gaps in training and curriculum alignment.

Grades 6-12

The district has established a calendar that outlines the frequency of local and state assessments. According to the plan, literacy coaches will assist teachers in curricular implementation and data analysis related to formative and summative assessments as the Professional Learning Community (PLC) structure permits. Collaboration between literacy coaches, school administrators, and SAVVAS will facilitate the creation of an implementation calendar featuring short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. Progress towards these goals will be evaluated during district and school-based improvement meetings, with teams actively participating in Dynamic Impact Cycles to promote ongoing reflection and enhancement informed by data-driven insights. This systematic approach ensures continuous monitoring, support, and adjustments to achieve desired student outcomes effectively and maintain implementation integrity.

5.0 Community Culture and Engagement: *Implementation*

Grades K-5

Focus groups reported that the 100 Book curriculum (requiring students to be responsible for 30 minutes of reading at home) creates a daily family engagement opportunity. Literacy nights teach parents how to support structured literacy learning, and teachers take the initiative to implement family engagement activities. However, teachers have stated challenges with connecting community engagement, especially in rural/Title I schools. The district has had robust and multimodal family engagement through grant support, which funded a position and organization ending this school year.

Grades 6-12

The Worcester County Public Schools (WCPS) School Improvement Guide for 2024-2025 adopts the Dynamic Impact approach to promote ongoing enhancement within schools.

Recommendations: Next Steps

1.0 Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K-5

With the adoption of the new curriculum, the burden of aligning materials and determining pacing will be reduced for teachers and coaches. However, there will still be a need for alignment between the foundational skills and knowledge/comprehension programs. The district should consider aligning these Tier I programs with Tier II programs to ensure that teachers are not taking on that additional burden while also learning to implement a new curriculum.

This is also an opportunity to build scaffolds and models to address diverse learners, including language and cultural diversity, beyond what the publisher provides. It is unclear whether the “integrity tools” for evaluating implementation include these elements.

Plans should outline how teachers can adjust instructional time and intensity based on student needs, particularly for high-needs populations.

Despite lower proportions of certain demographics in WCPS, distribution may vary, necessitating a clear plan with measurable goals for PD focused on academic interventions. Observations and feedback mechanisms should also be included to support those delivering these interventions.

Grades 6-12

The plan should address how explicit, scaffolded instruction will be provided to all students, including methods for identifying student needs and responsive teaching strategies. The myPerspectives curriculum should ensure direct vocabulary instruction, context clues, and morphological awareness; additional resources and training should be provided if any elements are missing. Instruction with complex texts must also explicitly teach text structure and strategies.

The district should develop specific plans to ensure all students receive targeted instruction in writing strategies and plans for identifying, remediating, and monitoring progress for struggling and multilingual learners.

2.0 Professional Learning

Grades K-5

The district has multiple venues for professional learning, and the new Wit and Wisdom curriculum has been adopted. However, teachers have expressed a primary need for training to enact Tier 2 and Tier 3 programmatic interventions. There is also an expressed need for consistent training to address the needs of diverse learners and models for culturally responsive practices. The plan explicitly mentions Science of Reading (SoR) strategies for grades 6-8 to inform professional development (PD) requirements for teachers effectively implementing the curriculum.

The district must establish vertically aligned PD plans and clarify the role of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in supporting this alignment and sustainability. An active coaching model exists to enhance teachers' knowledge of SoR, but more explicit details are needed on how "lit lab" teachers will facilitate vertical and horizontal alignment.

Grades 6-12

It is essential to clarify how the district currently employs or intends to utilize Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to address the diverse needs of all students. A comprehensive plan that specifies applying UDL principles to accommodate various student needs should be developed. Furthermore, once implemented, the district should establish a framework for monitoring the effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement within the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) plan.

3.0 Multi-tiered Support Systems

K-5

General education teachers need support to adapt instruction to support multiple needs and Tier II/III instruction. Based on the plan review and focus group reports, whether teachers have access to and knowledge of the data via iReady/mClass or specific training on the intervention programs utilized in Tier II/III is still being determined.

The ARC 100 Books program, which involves extended periods of independent reading, is used during intervention. Independent reading can be a problematic use of time, particularly for students who need strong foundational skills, as highlighted by several teachers during focus groups. The district should ensure that approaches are being used instead of “sustained silent reading” (an approach to independent reading that has been found to have adverse effects) during this time. ARC has included these approaches in recent updates (2022); however, these often involve teacher interaction, which may conflict with using this time for interventions.

Grades 6-12

The district should systematically monitor successes and improvement areas as the implementation of the district plan progresses. It is crucial to ensure that targeted instruction is coherent, differentiated, and adaptable based on student growth. Additionally, classroom-based interventions for secondary support must be identified and implemented effectively. Instruction during iReady intervention sessions should align with the broader classroom instruction to ensure consistency. Furthermore, it is imperative that all Educational Assistants have access to literacy training. A protocol should be developed to ensure that interventions appropriately match student needs.

4.0 Instructional Leadership**Grades K-5**

As the district moves toward a more streamlined curriculum, it should consider how it may utilize resources (coaches/PLCs) to support teachers in implementing all Tiers of instruction for their particular students now that there will be less need for them to align materials.

Grades 6-12

The data analysis protocol requires increased specificity, including details regarding the scheduling of data meetings and their frequency. Although annual data are disaggregated and presented in this plan, it remains to be seen whether the district engages in more frequent data disaggregation; this should be clarified. Furthermore, the timing of meetings and the extent to which trend identification is prioritized need to be explicitly addressed.

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

The district has multiple means of engagement for communities. Continue to promote and enhance schools' work, explicitly promoting community literacy.



Grades 6-12

The district should expand its plans to actively engage community partners at the secondary level. Current plans are detailed for grades K-5 but lack specifications for grades 6-12.