*****Massachusetts Department of***

***Elementary and Secondary Education***

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| Jeffrey C. Riley  *Commissioner* |  |

# MEMORANDUM

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| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner |
| **Date:** | November 14, 2023 |
| **Subject:** | Early Literacy Update |

Following the discussion of Early Literacy that occurred at the May 2023 Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) meeting, this memorandum provides additional information about the curricular materials in use across the Commonwealth for early literacy instruction.

***Curriculum Matters***  
High-quality curricular materials are a key resource that teachers use to meet the needs of their students. Early literacy curricular materials, in particular, guide the instructional approaches that teachers use with their students. High-quality curricular materials make it easier for teachers to use the best-known evidence-based, culturally and linguistically sustaining practices.

Expanding access to high-quality curricular materials can significantly improve student outcomes, especially when teachers have the professional learning opportunities they need to make the most of those materials. How much of a difference can curricular materials make? A variety of research studies have found:

* As much as more than half a year of learning (Kane et al., 2016)
* About 1.5 times the difference between an average teacher and one at the 75th percentile (Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012)
* More than the difference between a new teacher and one with three years of experience (Kane, 2016).

***Defining Quality***

In 2019, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department or DESE) introduced Curriculum Ratings by Teachers ([CURATE](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/curate/)), a resource to support the identification and selection of high-quality instructional materials. CURATE is a key Department initiative that defines curriculum quality for the Massachusetts context. The English Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy CURATE rubric provides a definition of quality curricular materials in areas such as Text Quality and Organization; Foundational Skills; Accessibility for Students; and Usability for Teachers. The Department has reviewed and published CURATE reports on 21 ELA/Literacy programs for grades K-5, providing actionable information that helps teachers and administrators select the best curricular materials for their local context.

As another indicator of quality, the Department also refers educators, teachers, and administrators to product reviews from EdReports, a national non-profit organization that similarly coordinates panels of teachers to review curricular materials. Some curricular materials that have been historically popular in Massachusetts, such as Units of Study for Teaching Reading and Fountas & Pinnell Classroom (both published by Heinemann), have been determined not to meet expectations for quality by EdReports.

***Current State of Curricular Materials in Use in Massachusetts***

The Department collects information from districts about what curricula are in use; these data show an increase in districts reporting using high-quality instructional materials for elementary ELA/Literacy from 24 districts in 2022 to 87 in 2023. This is most likely an undercount, as many districts have not reported their curriculum data to DESE. Fundations remains the most commonly reported curricular material in use for foundational skills instruction, which includes phonics, phonological awareness, and fluency. Units of Study remains the most commonly reported curricular material in use in Massachusetts in grades K-5 for non-foundational skills instruction, which includes reading comprehension.

***Funding Supports***

The Department has offered numerous competitive grants to assist schools and districts in adopting and/or implementing high-quality curricular materials. Since 2019, these grants include:

* Student Opportunity Act–Evidence Based Practices grant, funding a range of evidence-based early literacy investments (offered in 2021 and 2022)
* Growing Literacy Equity Across Massachusetts (GLEAM) grant, providing significant funding for a range of literacy investments in a selected cohort of schools (offered 2021 to present)
* Accelerated Literacy Learning with HQIM grant, funding districts to purchase high-quality instructional materials for literacy and associated professional development (offered in 2021 and 2023)
* High-Quality Instructional Materials Implementation Grant, funding districts to provide professional learning associated with newly adopted curricular materials (offered in 2022)
* High-Quality Instructional Materials Purchase grant, funding districts to purchase high-quality instructional materials for literacy (offered in 2023)

At the November 21, 2023 meeting, Department staff will update the Board on progress in this area, and representatives from districts will also be present to describe their experiences with high-quality literacy instructional materials.