*****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:** | June 19, 2020 |
| **Subject:** | Early Literacy: Report on Department Initiative |

At the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) meeting on June 30, 2020, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) staff will share information about a new early literacy initiative underway.

***Background***  
Staff in the Department’s Office of Literacy and Humanities engaged educators and other stakeholders statewide in 2018 and 2019 to develop the Department’s Literacy Strategic Plan, which is entitled *An Excellent Education in ELA and Literacy for All*. This strategic plan identifies two areas of focus for the Department’s instructional support for English Language Arts and Literacy: *high quality core instruction* and *evidence-based early literacy*. At the June Board meeting, we will update the Board on evidence-based early literacy.

Reading achievement data in Massachusetts suggests that many of our students are not receiving adequate instructional support to become readers in the first years of their education. Only 56 percent of Massachusetts third graders met reading expectations on the 2019 MCAS test. 38 percent of our Black and Hispanic/Latino students, and 22 percent of our students with disabilities met expectations. On the most recent NAEP reading assessment, while Massachusetts topped the nation overall, 4th grade Black and Hispanic students in Massachusetts attained the same score as white students in the lowest-performing state in the nation. The need to enhance our early literacy instruction statewide is clear.

***Evidence-Based Early Literacy Initiative***   
To address the need for enhanced early literacy instruction, over the next several years the Department will issue guidance for early literacy programming paired with implementation supports, including resources, professional development, and grants. Our first step in this initiative is to issue guidance that serves three purposes:

* Provide information about reading acquisition and instruction that is based in current evidence
* Describe evidence-based literacy practices that should be used in schools and taught in educator preparation programs
* Compile quality instructional resources and useful references to support educators

This guidance will be web-based on a new website expected to launch in July 2020. It has been developed over the course of nine months in concert with a wide range of Massachusetts-based stakeholders (including teachers, administrators, local professional development providers, and educator preparation faculty) as well as national and international researchers in the area of literacy.

Separately, the Department is also developing more specialized guidelines related to reading difficulties, including dyslexia. These guidelines will be coordinated with our other resources related to literacy and will be mutually reinforcing.

After the release of the guidance in July 2020, we will align resources and support schools and districts with implementation. Anticipated supports include:

* *Early Grades Literacy grant*. Pending funding from the state legislature, the Department will award grants to schools in FY2021 for targeted professional development and other resources.
* *Department-led professional development.* We will conduct conferences and professional learning networks of educators, including educator preparation programs, to publicize the guidance and provide professional development.
* *Free resources*. Pending funding, the Department plans to develop aligned professional development courses and curricular materials, which would be online and free to Massachusetts educators.
* *New tools for educator preparation programs*. The Department will develop new resources for educator preparation programs to enhance their ability to train candidates in alignment with the early literacy guidance, focusing on the Candidate Assessment of Performance (CAP). Relevant Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL) are also being updated in accordance with the guidance.

Finally, in coordination with the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), the Department submitted an application to the U.S. Education Department (USED) for the federal Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant. If awarded, the Department will be able to offer extensive professional development and grants to high-needs districts across the state directed towards K-12 literacy programming over the next five years. USED is expected to announce those awards in August.

Senior Associate Commissioner Heather Peske and Director of Literacy and Humanities Katherine Tarca will be at the Board meeting on June 30 to describe this initiative and answer your questions.

Attachment: Literacy Strategic Plan for Massachusetts (released in November 2019 and publicly available on DESE website at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/literacy-humanities.html>)