*****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 13, 2020 |
| **Subject:** | Early Literacy: Update on *Mass Literacy* Initiative |

At the June 2020 Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) meeting, we described the [Literacy Strategic Plan](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/literacy-plan.docx) completed last year, and introduced the Department’s initiative to promote evidence-based early literacy. At the Board meeting last month, I presented my [goals and objectives for 2020-2021](https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/docs/fy2021/2020-10/item5.docx), which include our continued focus on early literacy. At the November Board meeting, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) staff from the Center for Instructional Support will share updates on the early literacy initiative.

***Background***
Achievement data in Massachusetts suggests that many of our students are not receiving adequate instructional support to make crucial literacy progress in the first years of their education. Only 56 percent of all Massachusetts third graders met reading expectations on the 2019 English Language Arts MCAS. Furthermore, just 38 percent of Massachusetts third graders identified as Black or Hispanic/Latino, and 22 percent of our third-grade students with disabilities, met expectations. Though Massachusetts consistently leads the nation on the NAEP reading assessments, more than one third of our 4th grade Black and Hispanic/Latino students score Below Basic; furthermore, the proficiency levels for those students are less than half that for White students. The need to enhance early literacy instructional practices statewide is clear.

***“Mass Literacy”***
The Department recently launched Mass Literacy, a new initiative to support educators in providing students with enhanced early literacy instruction. The first major milestone in this initiative is new guidance for early literacy programming. This guidance, called the **Mass Literacy Guide**, is now available at [www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy](http://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy). This is the Department’s first endorsement of specific instructional practices for early literacy, which are more detailed than the general guidelines stated in the [English Language Arts and Literacy Curriculum Framework](https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/2017-06.pdf). We developed the Mass Literacy Guide over the course of nearly a year, 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. Many of our collaborators are acknowledged on this page: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/about.html>

Mass Literacy takes a strong stand on equity, especially regarding the importance of evidence-based, effective instructional practices to address inadequacies in the literacy opportunities provided to Black and Hispanic/Latino students and English learners. The Department’s statement about equity in early literacy is available here: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/pathway-to-equity.html>

On a separate but related track, the Department is developing more detailed guidelines related to reading difficulties, including dyslexia. These guidelines will be coordinated with the Mass Literacy Guide.

***Literacy Program Support for Schools and Districts***With the Mass Literacy Guide now available, the Department is shifting focus to support implementation of evidence-based early literacy practices in schools and districts. Supports available to schools and districts include:

* *CLSD grant programs*. In September 2020, the Department was awarded $19.98 million from the U.S. Department of Education through the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant, to support high-quality literacy learning in grades preK-12. This grant will allow the Department to award nearly $19 million over the next 4 ½ years to districts and charter schools, including $8 million to increase the quality of elementary literacy programming. Additionally, the Department will collaborate with the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) to award $3 million to expand access to high-quality preK programs.
* *Early Grades Literacy grant*. The Department has awarded grants to school districts for a year of intensive professional development in evidence-based early literacy. We announced the [recipients](https://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2021/awards/734.docx) of this state-funded grant last month.
* *Open-source professional development*. In response to demand from educators, the Department is developing courses aligned to the Mass Literacy Guide, which will be available online and free to Massachusetts educators.
* *Early literacy tutoring for coronavirus response*. Using funding from the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) fund, the Department will fund up to $8.5 million in early literacy tutoring services for Massachusetts students in grades K-3. The Department has identified several high-quality tutoring providers and is working to match those providers with schools and community organizations, where young students who may have been affected by COVID-related pauses in learning can access supplemental support to accelerate their literacy progress. Communities in diverse geographic areas of the state will participate in this opportunity.
* *Early literacy screening assessment grant*. Building on a successful grant program offered in FY2020, the Department will awards funds in FY2021 to elementary schools to adopt and implement a valid and reliable early literacy screening assessment, a tool seen as essential to an evidence-based early literacy program. This grant will also be funded through the GEER fund.

***Literacy Program Support for Educator Preparation Programs***The Department is developing new resources for educator preparation programs to enhance their ability to train candidates in alignment with evidence-based practices, focusing on the Candidate Assessment of Performance (CAP). Relevant Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTELs), including the Reading Specialist test and the Foundations of Reading test, are also being updated in alignment with the Mass Literacy Guide and relevant up-to-date content.

Senior Associate Commissioner Heather Peske and Director of Literacy and Humanities Katherine Tarca will be at the Board meeting this month to provide an update and answer your questions. Massachusetts educators who are active in the Mass Literacy initiative will also speak to the Board.