*****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:** | December 7, 2021 |
| **Subject:** | Early Literacy: Mass Literacy Update |

At the June and November 2020 Board of Elementary and Secondary Education meetings, we reviewed the Department’s [Literacy Strategic Plan](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/literacy-plan.docx) and introduced the Department’s initiative to promote evidence-based early literacy, which is called Mass Literacy. At the October 2021 Board meeting, I presented my goals and objectives for the current school year, which include our continued focus on early literacy. At the December 2021 meeting, Department staff from the Center for Instructional Support will update the Board on the Mass Literacy initiative.

***Background***  
Achieving proficient literacy skills by grade 3 is a key determinant of future success. Third grade reading ability is linked to future academic achievement and future employment, and sets children up for a lifetime of success.

However, achievement data in Massachusetts suggests that many of our students are not receiving adequate instructional support to reach this crucial third grade proficiency milestone:

* Only 56 percent of Massachusetts third graders who were tested met or exceeded reading expectations on the 2021 English Language Arts MCAS test.
* Only 22 percent of Massachusetts third graders with disabilities, 32 percent identified as Black, and 28 percent identified as Hispanic/Latino, met or exceeded expectations on the 2021 English Language Arts MCAS test.
* Though Massachusetts consistently leads the nation on the national NAEP reading assessment for fourth graders, only 25 percent of Massachusetts Black and Hispanic/Latino students scored Proficient on the most recent test, compared to 54 percent of white students.

While grade 3 reading is an often-cited milestone, grade 1 reading ability is also significant. Research has shown that students who are off-track in reading at the end of grade 1 usually require intensive intervention in later years and often struggle to catch up. It is possible to prevent this unnecessary struggle by setting students on a path to success with excellent instruction in the earliest grades. It is critically important to strengthen preK-3 literacy instruction statewide so that all our students achieve these early milestones on the path to long-term success.

***Mass Literacy***   
Mass Literacy is an initiative of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department or DESE) to support educators in providing students with enhanced early literacy instruction with this guiding vision:

### Every student in Massachusetts will develop the language comprehension, fluent word reading, and writing skills needed by the end of grade 1 and will continue to increase literacy proficiency through the end of grade 3. Reaching these critical milestones will place all students on-track for long-term academic success. In addition, students in grades preK-3 will have affirming and enriching experiences with literacy. This will be possible as a result of educators’ knowledge of literacy development and their skillful implementation of evidence-based, inclusive, culturally responsive literacy practices.

The first major milestone of the Mass Literacy initiative was the launch of the Mass Literacy Guide, available at [www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy](http://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy). The Mass Literacy Guide is a web-based compendium of current information, research, and resources for early literacy, and serves as the state’s guidance for evidence-based practices. Since its launch in November 2020, the Mass Literacy Guide has received well over 100,000 pageviews.

***Literacy Program Support for Schools and Districts***  
DESE has offered numerous grants, resources, and supports to assist districts in implementing evidence-based early literacy practices. These include:

* *GLEAM grant*. In September 2020, the Department was awarded $19.98 million from the U.S. Department of Education through the competitive Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant, to support high-quality literacy learning in grades preK-12. Under the program name Growing Literacy Equity Across Massachusetts: GLEAM, the Department will award nearly $19 million over the next 4 ½ years to districts and charter schools using CLSD funds, including $8 million to increase the quality of elementary literacy and $3 million for preschool literacy. We selected the first cohort of GLEAM recipients earlier this year.
* *Early Grades Literacy grant*. The Department has awarded grants to school districts for two years 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 two-year, state-funded grant in 2020.
* *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 identified several high-quality tutoring providers and matched 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 are participating in this opportunity.
* *Mass Literacy Support Network.* The Department is leading 120 building-based literacy leaders in a collaborative learning experience focused on data-based decision making for early literacy.
* *Dyslexia Guidelines support.* Following the release of the Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines in 2020, the Department has revised key resources, such as the list of approved early literacy screening assessments, to ensure coherence between Mass Literacy and the Dyslexia Guidelines. Additional dyslexia-focused supports, including an intensive course and educator-friendly resources, are being offered this year.

***Preparing Educators to Teach Early Literacy***  
In line with the vision of Mass Literacy, it is critical that prospective teachers are learning evidence-based early literacy practices and how they can be enacted in a culturally responsive way. Currently in Massachusetts, the extent to which new teachers are learning evidence-based early literacy practices varies widely. According to a [2021 syllabi review](https://region1cc.org/blog/assessing-educator-preparedness-massachusetts-effectively-teach-early-literacy-instruction) of required courses in elementary and early childhood programs across nine teacher preparation providers, candidates in some programs currently have limited or no opportunities to learn about key topics such as decoding, phonemic awareness, and components of writing instruction. To equip new teachers in the Commonwealth with the skills and knowledge to provide the highest-quality instruction to students, the Mass Literacy initiative has an important focus on educator preparation policies and supports.

*DESE's goal is that by SY2024-2025, all Early Childhood, Elementary, and Moderate Disabilities teacher candidates in Massachusetts are prepared, through coursework and opportunities for practice and high-quality feedback, in evidence-based early literacy as outlined in the Mass Literacy Guide.*

DESE is launching a multi-year initiative to support and invest educator preparation providers in meeting the goal of preparing all prospective teachers in evidence-based early literacy practices aligned to Mass Literacy. This initiative includes:

* **Articulating new literacy-focused expectations for all relevant licensure programs,** which will be evaluated as part of programs’ formal review and approval process, so all teacher candidates have access to information about literacy and language acquisition based in current evidence.
* **Providing guidance and resources to support program improvements/ enhancements,** including but not limited to informational webinars, opt-in formative feedback program reviews, and grant opportunities to support knowledge-building and programmatic changes.
* **Updating and expanding licensure assessments aligned to Mass Literacy and MA curriculum frameworks,** including the recently updated Foundations of Reading MA Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL), the Reading Specialist MTEL (currently under revision), and the identification of alternative assessments for Foundations of Reading through the 3-year [MTEL-Alternative Assessment Pilot](https://www.doe.mass.edu/mtel/alt-assess/default.html).
* **Developing tools to support practice,** including a content-specific observation and feedback tool aligned to components of a full literacy block (to be piloted in spring 2022).

The Department will continue to partner with and incorporate input from higher education faculty and administrators, PreK–12 educators, families, and students as we collectively work to empower educators with the evidence-based practices for literacy that all students need.

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