*****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:** | May 17, 2023 |
| **Subject:** | Early Literacy: Mass Literacy Update |

Early literacy has been an area of focused activity and investment by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) since 2019. At the May 23, 2023 meeting, Department staff will update the Board on progress in this area.

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

However, literacy achievement has declined nationwide between 2019 and 2022 due in part to the pandemic, and achievement data in Massachusetts suggests that many of our students are not reaching the crucial milestone of third grade literacy proficiency. Student data from the 2022 English Language Arts MCAS test showed:

* 44 percent of Massachusetts third graders who were tested met or exceeded expectations.
* Only 15 percent of Massachusetts third graders with disabilities, 28 percent identified as Black, and 23 percent identified as Hispanic/Latino met or exceeded expectations.

***Mass Literacy***

It is possible to set all students on a path to literacy success with excellent instruction in the earliest grades. To address this need, in 2019 the Department released a [Literacy Strategic Plan](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/literacy-plan.docx) after extensive engagement with educators, experts, and other stakeholders. This plan identified evidence-based early literacy and high-quality instructional materials as the Department’s two focus areas. In 2020, the Department launched the Mass Literacy initiative to promote evidence-based early literacy across the Commonwealth. Mass Literacy is guided by this 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 Department’s mission in this initiative is to support pre-service and in-service educators in grades preK-3 to gain deep knowledge of literacy development and to skillfully implement evidence-based, inclusive, culturally responsive practices using high-quality instructional materials and assessments. In service of this mission, the Department has invested in supporting educators in 5 areas:

* Guidance, resources, and information;
* High-quality instructional materials;
* Professional learning;
* Funding; and
* Educator preparation.

***Guidance, resources, and information***

The **Mass Literacy Guide**, available at [www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy](http://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy), 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.

Also in 2020, the Department released the [Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/dyslexia-guidelines.pdf), developed as required by M.G.L. Chapter 71, § 57A, added by St. 2018, c.272, § 1. At the same time, the Department began providing a list of approved early literacy screening assessments to support districts in selecting an evidence-based assessment tool for early literacy.

In September 2022, the Board adopted a [regulation](https://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=26937#:~:text=On%20September%2020%2C%202022%2C%20the,through%20at%20least%20third%20grade.) (amending 603 CMR 28.03) that requires all elementary schools to assess each student's reading abilities and early literacy skills at least twice per year from kindergarten through at least third grade, effective July 1, 2023. To support educators in complying with the regulation, the Department will be issuing detailed guidance on early literacy screening.

***High Quality Instructional Materials***

In 2019, the Department 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 in which panels of Massachusetts educators review and rate evidence on curricular materials. The Department will have published 75 CURATE reports by the end of this school year, providing actionable information that helps educators select the best curricular materials for their local context.

To address the specific need for affordable high-quality instructional materials for early reading foundational skills, the Department published Appleseeds in 2022. Appleseeds is a complete set of curricular materials for reading foundational skills, grades K-2, available as a resource to any educator, school, or district to access at no cost.

***Professional Learning***

The Department continues to support or directly provide professional learning for educators focused on early literacy through a number of programs. The Early Grades Literacy program and the Tiered Literacy Academy, both long-running programs, support school-based teams with in-depth early literacy professional learning over multiple years. In addition, the Department convenes various educator professional learning networks each year, designed to be responsive to expressed needs of schools and districts. Finally, in 2022, the Department introduced the popular [Open Access Professional Learning](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/ela/oapl/) (OAPL) program, in which educators can opt-in to vetted early literacy professional learning workshops and courses at no cost. Approximately 2,700 educators benefited from these courses in the current school year.

***Funding***

The Department has offered numerous competitive grants to assist schools and districts in moving towards an evidence-based, culturally responsive early literacy approach. Since 2019, these grants include:

* Screening assessment grant, funding purchase of an approved screening assessment and associated professional development (PD) (offered annually since 2019)
* 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 PD (offered in 2021 and 2023)

In addition, as a pandemic response, the Department began funding early literacy tutoring in 2020. The Department has vetted and selected a small number of qualified early literacy tutoring providers and assists high-needs districts in partnering with these providers. Students from participating districts receive tutoring at no cost, and the Department is currently inviting new districts into this initiative, supported by ESSER funding.

***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 to implement them in a culturally responsive way. The Department’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. To support this goal, the Department updated the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL) aligned to Mass Literacy and MA curriculum framework**s,** including the recently updated Foundations of Reading MTEL, the Reading Specialist MTEL, and the identification of alternative assessments for Foundations of Reading through the 4-year [MTEL-Alternative Assessment Pilot](https://www.doe.mass.edu/mtel/alt-assess/default.html). In 2022, the Department articulated 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.

***Looking Ahead***

Focus and investment in early literacy will continue as the Department works towards our vision of every student in Massachusetts meeting or exceeding literacy standards by the end of grade one and continuing to increase literacy proficiency through the end of grade three. Looking ahead, the Department’s activities in this area will include:

* **Expansion of tutoring partnerships**. With an infusion of additional ESSER funds, the Department is pleased to be able to expand its tutoring initiative to serve more students in the coming summer and school year.
* **Continuation of professional learning programs**. Programs such as Early Grades Literacy, GLEAM, and educator networks focused on Mass Literacy will serve additional cohorts of educators. For SY24, the Department will focus especially on assisting schools in fulfilling the new screening assessment regulation through a variety of professional learning opportunities.
* **Formal review of educator preparation programs**. Beginning in SY24, the Department will evaluate programs under review using the new standards for early literacy in relevant licensure areas.
* **Achievement data for grades K-3 literacy**. In summer 2023, the Department will release an analysis of reading achievement data from a sample of K-3 students statewide. The first analysis of its kind, this release will shed new light on areas where students are experiencing success in early literacy and areas where more support is needed.

At the May 23 meeting, Katherine Tarca, Director of Literacy and Humanities, Russell Johnston, Deputy Commissioner, and Erin Hashimoto-Martell, Associate Commissioner of Instructional Support, will provide additional information about the Department’s early literacy initiatives and answer questions from the Board.