# MEMORANDUM

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **To:** | Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education |
| **From:** | Russell D. Johnston, Acting Commissioner |
| **Date:** | January 21, 2025 |
| **Subject:** | Early Literacy and Literacy Launch Update |

This memorandum provides updates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education regarding early literacy initiatives, including Literacy Launch and actions the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has taken to integrate recommendations from the Board’s Special Committee on Pandemic Recovery and Literacy into our ongoing early literacy initiatives. At the Board meeting on January 28, 2025, DESE staff will present an overview of this information along with a report on early literacy high-dosage tutoring.

***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. It is possible to set all students on a path to literacy success with excellent instruction in the earliest grades. In 2019, DESE launched the [Mass Literacy](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/about.html) initiative, the goal of which 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 and linguistically sustaining practices using high-quality instructional materials and assessments. Since then, DESE has offered a range of resources, grants, professional learning opportunities, and support programs for schools serving students in grades preK-3.

***Literacy Launch***

Literacy Launch is a multi-year strategy supported by a new line item in the FY25 state budget that allocates $20M for this current year, allowing DESE to expand upon existing early literacy programs and supports. Literacy Launch is expected to be funded for 5 years. DESE will organize the following Literacy Launch programs, in collaboration with the Department of Early Education and Care and Executive Office of Education:

* Partnership for Reading Success – Massachusetts (PRISM) Grants
* High-quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) Communities of Practice
* Literacy Launch Professional Learning
* Accelerated review of educator preparation programs
* Support for educator preparation programs

***PRISM grants***

Partnership for Reading Success – Massachusetts (PRISM) grants are a centerpiece of the Literacy Launch initiative. These grants will provide substantial funding and intensive support to school districts and charter schools over multiple years in order to transform literacy instruction in their communities. The **PRISM I grant** is designed for districts already using high-quality instructional materials in grades K-3 and poised to become statewide exemplars for high-performing literacy programs.

Districts and charter schools were invited to apply for PRISM I in fall 2024. DESE received 41 applications, creating a competitive selection process. DESE will evaluate proposals based on conditions for early literacy program success, including:

* Recent emphasis on and investments in evidence-based, culturally sustaining early literacy practices;
* Commitment to early literacy improvement, and specifically to PRISM, from key constituencies including school committee, principals, and teachers;
* Acknowledgement of and meaningful steps to address early literacy achievement disparities along lines of race, income, language status, and/or disability status.

Competitive priority will be awarded to districts and charters applying as a consortium, as well as those with:

* Below-average overall proportion of students meeting expectations on 2024 grade 3 ELA/Literacy MCAS;
* Recent substantial increase in newcomer enrollment;
* Fewer than 1,000 students enrolled in grades K-3;
* A dual-language program or school; and/or
* Chronically underperforming designation.

Awarded districts will receive up to 5 years of funding and technical assistance to achieve truly excellent early literacy programming. To evaluate the impact of this support, DESE has set the following student outcome metrics of success for PRISM I, designed to evaluate success at the conclusion of the program.

* Fluent word reading metrics of success (measured with early literacy screening assessments):
  + 80% of students in the PRISM I cohort meet reading benchmarks by the end of each grade K-3
  + Reduce disparities\* in the percentage of students in the PRISM I cohort meeting reading benchmarks annually
* Comprehension and writing metrics of success (measured with grade 3 ELA MCAS):
  + 33% increase in the percentage of students in the PRISM I cohort meeting or exceeding expectations *(over 2024 levels)*
  + Reduce disparities\* in the percentage of students in the PRISM I cohort meeting or exceeding expectations annually

*\*Disparities between Black and Hispanic/Latino students, multilingual learners, and students receiving special education services, and their peers not in those groups.*

Annual incremental progress in PRISM I schools is expected and will be monitored. DESE proposes the following annual targets for schools in PRISM I.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Measure** | **End of year 1 target** | **End of year 2**  **target** | **End of year 3**  **target** | **End of program target** |
| Early literacy screening assessment | 40% meeting | 55% meeting | 70% meeting | 80% of students meet reading benchmarks in each grade K-3 |

The current (2024-25) year will be an opportunity to measure baseline early literacy screening results and determine whether the proposed annual targets above are appropriately ambitious and achievable.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Measure** | **End of year 1 target** | **End of year 2**  **target** | **End of year 3**  **target** | **End of program target** |
| MCAS | 5% increase | 10% increase | 20% increase | 33% increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on MCAS *(over 2024 levels)* |

The 33% increase target would bring grade 3 ELA MCAS achievement in PRISM I districts closer to pre-pandemic levels, and in some cases would exceed those levels.

The **PRISM II** grant is expected to be made available later this school year and will be designed for districts and charter schools looking to acquire high-quality instructional materials for early literacy. Outside of Literacy Launch, DESE also expects to offer a   
**PRISM III** grant aimed at supporting adolescent literacy (grades 4-12) supported by federal grant funds.

***Special Committee on Pandemic Recovery and Literacy Recommendations***

In September 2024, the Board’s Special Committee on Pandemic Recovery and Literacy concluded their work and reported their recommendations to the Board. DESE staff are now working to integrate those recommendations into ongoing early literacy initiatives. The following committee recommendations, in particular, have been a focus of DESE’s efforts:

* *Collect and monitor data on early literacy outcomes, including grade 3 ELA/Literacy MCAS and early literacy screening data, and determine whether regulatory changes are necessary to collect these data*. The Department continues to collect and closely monitor early literacy screening results and recently released [new findings from a study of this data](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/ela/research/default.html).
* *Center racial equity in policymaking by setting equity-driven achievement goals and monitoring efforts to ensure all student groups are making equitable progress*. All Literacy Launch programs, including the PRISM I grant as described above, have student achievement targets that address disparate outcomes.
* *Include experts in multilingual language and literacy development in all early literacy program and policy development.* DESE has engaged local and national experts in multilingual language and literacy development to advise and guide several key initiatives this year, including an effort to approve early literacy screening assessments in languages other than English. The Center for Applied Linguistics is DESE’s partner in this project.
* *Review widely used modes of professional development, for example LETRS training, to ensure adequate attention to the needs of multilingual students*. DESE is currently procuring a vendor to deliver statewide Literacy Launch Professional Learning. A key criterion in the vendor selection is expertise in, and ability to deliver, strong evidence-based training to educators in best practices for serving multilingual learners.
* *Remain committed to the 2024 target to implement formal program reviews using new early literacy specific criteria for relevant program areas*. According to this commitment, DESE has initiated formal program reviews of educator preparation programs using new early literacy specific criteria for relevant program areas.
* *Maintain formal review criteria that require educator preparation programs to provide strong coursework on all aspects of language and literacy development and evidence-based practices for working with all students, including and especially multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and students with reading difficulties.* DESE’s new [formal review criteria](https://www.doe.mass.edu/edprep/resources/early-literacy-criteria.pdf) for early literacy were released earlier in 2024 and meet these requirements.
* *Regularly review and update the CURATE rubric and process to ensure these key resources remain current with evolving research and new curricula being published.* The CURATE process and [website](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/curate/default.html) were revised and clarified in summer 2024, including archiving of outdated CURATE reports to ensure that information provided through CURATE is up-to-date.
* *Ramp up efforts to collect information from districts about which curricula are in use, if necessary through regulatory changes, and make that information easier for the public to access and navigate*. DESE enhanced efforts to collect information about curricula in use in 2024 and successfully increased the rate of reporting by districts. In addition, DESE launched a new user-friendly [dashboard of curriculum information](https://curriculumdashboard.mass.gov/) earlier this year.

At the January 28 meeting, Erin Hashimoto-Martell, Associate Commissioner of Instructional Support, Katherine Tarca, Director of Literacy & Humanities, and Linda Sewnarine, Assistant Director of Literacy, will present an overview of this information to the Board and invite discussion, questions, and feedback.