An Excellent Education in English Language Arts and Literacy for **All**

Literacy Strategic Plan for Massachusetts

Office of Literacy and Humanities

Center for Instructional Support

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

| **Introduction and Purpose** |
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Our vision is an excellent education in English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy for all students in Massachusetts, in which EVERY student:

* Masters the rigorous standards set forth in the Massachusetts [ELA/Literacy Curriculum Framework](http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/2017-06.pdf)
* Develops rich vocabulary and knowledge about the world
* Develops the dispositions and social-emotional competencies needed to thrive in society and life.

This document describes the initiatives and projects the Center for Instructional Support at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education intends to undertake to work towards our vision of an excellent ELA/Literacy education for EVERY student in Massachusetts. This document does not directly prescribe actions for Massachusetts schools or districts. However, we hope that by clearly laying out our focus areas, goals, and initiatives, along with the rationale behind them, schools and districts will be able to find points of alignment with DESE’s work, capitalize on our offerings, and partner together with us in service of student achievement.

This document lays out two major themes for our work: *High Quality Core Instruction* and *Evidence-Based Early Literacy*. Within each theme, we describe:

* *Why it matters*. This section reviews the relevant research to demonstrate the importance and impact of work in this area.
* *What students need*. This section describes what we are working towards—the practices that will make our vision a reality.
* *Our current state in Massachusetts*. This section describes where we currently stand in the Commonwealth with respect to this area.
* *Our goals and initiatives*. For each theme, we lay out our specific goals, and the ways in which we plan to support and partner with educators to reach those goals.

| **Executive Summary, page 1 of 2** |
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**Our vision**

We envision an excellent education in English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy for all students in Massachusetts, in which EVERY student:

* Masters the rigorous standards set forth in the Massachusetts [ELA/Literacy Curriculum Framework](http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/2017-06.pdf)
* Develops rich vocabulary and knowledge about the world
* Develops the dispositions and social-emotional competencies needed to thrive in society and life.

**Our purpose**This plan describes how we will work towards realizing our ambitious vision. This work is critical for two reasons. First, student ELA achievement in Massachusetts is stagnant. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed no significant difference in Massachusetts 4th grade reading achievement in 2017 compared to 2007. While Massachusetts currently leads the nation in reading achievement on NAEP, other states have accelerated growth over the last ten years, and particular student subgroups in other states have already surpassed their Massachusetts counterparts.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Furthermore, a recent report from the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership exposed the reality that Massachusetts is only “[number one for some](https://number1forsome.org/).” While we are at the top on NAEP, that ranking conceals inequitable achievement among student groups. On the most recent NAEP reading assessment, 4th and 8th grade Black and Hispanic students in Massachusetts attained the same score as white students *in the lowest-performing state in the nation*.A strengthened educational program in ELA/Literacy will contribute to closing the “opportunity gap” and enable ALL students in Massachusetts to reach their full potential as learners.

 **Our strategy**Working towards an excellent ELA/Literacy education for every child, we will prioritize supporting educators within the following two themes:

Evidence-Based
Early Literacy

High Quality
Core Instruction

High quality core instruction and evidence-based early literacy are both essential pathways to excellence and equity. Working towards these two themes in tandem will move us towards our vision of an excellent education in ELA/Literacy for EVERY child in Massachusetts.

| **Executive Summary, page 2 of 2** |
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Theme 1: High Quality Core Instruction

Core instruction refers to the instruction that all students receive, separate from any specialized instruction or interventions, to support their progress towards meeting grade-level standards. High-quality core instruction in ELA/Literacy starts with high-quality curriculum, characterized by appealing, rigorous texts and interesting tasks. Equipped with great materials, teachers plan learning experiences that allow ALL students to successfully work with those rigorous texts and tasks and achieve deeper learning.

**We will advance High Quality Core Instruction through four goal areas.**

Goal 4 Support the teaching of disciplinary literacy in the content areas (6-12)

Goal 3

Support effectiveness of literacy coaches

 (K-8)

Goal 2

Promote skillful implementation of high-quality instructional materials through high-quality professional development (K-8)

Goal 1

Promote high-quality core instructional materials

Theme 2: Evidence-based Early Literacy

Evidence-based early literacy refers to the implementation of practices that have been shown, through rigorous research, to promote literacy development in children in grades preK-3. These practices span a variety of domains, including components of the literacy program; classroom texts and instructional routines; systems for assessment; data-based decision making; and interventions.

**We will advance Evidence-Based Early Literacy through three goal areas.**

Goal 1Promote evidence-based early literacy instructional practices

Goal 2Promote comprehensive approach to assessment, including high-quality literacy screening assessment and data-based decision making

Goal 3Promote purposeful selection of high-quality, evidence-based interventions

Theme 1:
High Quality
Core Instruction

**Why It Matters**

The term “core instruction” refers to the learning experiences offered to all students,[[2]](#footnote-2) as opposed to intervention or specialized instruction that is tailored and offered to specific students. (Such interventions are critical but are not the focus of this section.) High Quality Core Instruction has two components: *high-quality curricular materials* that form the basis of learning experiences in the classroom, and teachers’ *skillful implementation* of those materials to create deep learning experiences for students.

*Curricular materials*
The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks describe what students should learn in our schools at each grade level. *How* students practice and ultimately master these standards is determined by educators. *Curricular materials* are the resources teachers use to facilitate student learning experiences (e.g., lesson plans, texts, tasks, etc.). Curricular materials may be designed, curated, or selected by an individual teacher, by a school or district team, or by a designated curriculum leader.

There is strong evidence that the quality of core curricular materials has large effects on student learning—effects that rival in size those that are associated with differences in teacher effectiveness (Chingos and Whitehurst, 2012; Whitehurst, 2009; Boser, Chingos, & Straus, 2015). One study found that providing teachers access to high-quality curricular materials led to improvement in student outcomes greater than the difference between a new teacher and one with three years of experience ([Kane, 2016](https://www.brookings.edu/research/never-judge-a-book-by-its-cover-use-student-achievement-instead/)). Recently, scholars have also argued that a comprehensive literacy curriculum—one that was developed to be coherent and connected throughout its various components—is superior to a “piecemeal” approach, because various components developed in isolation miss opportunities to reinforce each other or offer authentic tasks that tie together all components. This is true for the various components of early reading ([Liben and Paige, 2017](https://achievethecore.org/aligned/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Why-a-Structured-Phonics-Program-is-Effective.pdf)) as well as for the reading/writing connection in later grades ([Graham et al, 2016](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_secondary_writing_110116.pdf)).

Comprehensive core curricular materials in literacy, vertically aligned across a grade span, are more common to see in elementary schools as opposed to middle or high schools. However, research demonstrates that selection of curricular approaches and materials in ELA/English courses does impact student achievement all the way up through grade 12, with curriculum that emphasizes writing strategies showing particular promise (see [Baye et al, 2018](http://www.bestevidence.org/word/Secondary-Reading-01-31-18.pdf)).

High quality curricular materials are an essential tool for achieving equity. Historically underserved student groups, such as students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities, are less likely to be given high-quality materials in class. A recent study across multiple, diverse districts suggests that a substantial amount of class time is commonly devoted to curricular materials that are below grade level rigor in all types of classrooms, but that students of color are more likely to receive these easy assignments, widening the opportunity gap (TNTP, 2018). A high-quality curriculum also purposefully connects to and builds upon the cultural knowledge and experiences of students in order to maximize motivation and deeper learning ([Gay, 2002](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022487102053002003))—and when the curriculum fails to do this, it can contribute to deepening inequities.

*Skillful implementation*
Once high-quality curricular materials are in place, *skillful implementation* is critical. Recent studies focused on the impact of high-quality curricular materials have found that materials alone do not necessarily drive improved student achievement ([Blazar et al, 2019](https://cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/cepr-curriculum-report_learning-by-the-book.pdf)) —schools cannot acquire a new curriculum and then simply use it to “teach as usual.” Modern curricular materials aligned to today’s standards exhibit a level of complexity and rigor that can seem surprising and even overwhelming compared to outdated products and approaches. Creating learning experiences with these high-quality materials, and creating equitable access and learning for *all* students, requires a mindset of high expectations for all students as well as extensive professional teaching skill. A deep knowledge of content is necessary to make a high-quality curriculum come alive. Summarizing their recent study on the efficacy of high-quality curricular materials in math, Blazar and his colleagues wrote that it would be an “error” to think of “curriculum choice and teaching reforms as alternatives... It could be that in order to gain the benefits of either, districts must do both.”

How do we support educators to skillfully use high-quality curricular materials to create equitable, successful learning experiences for students? Teachers need professional development tied directly to their curriculum materials, and plenty of ongoing time to collaborate with colleagues. Ongoing, curriculum-specific professional development and/or coaching that is *directly tied to the curriculum used daily in the classroom* is the most promising route to enhanced classroom practice (Wiener and Pimentel, 2017). However, a national study found that teachers are provided, on average, approximately 1 day of training on new curricular materials, and about 25% of ELA/Literacy teachers report they have received no professional development at all on their main curricular materials (Opfer, Kaufman, and Thomson, 2016). This is patently insufficient given the complexity and rigor of today’s core curricular products—and this inadequate level of support leaves teachers feeling shortchanged and unprepared to implement the new materials.

Relatedly, a recent meta-analysis found that teacher coaching has a large positive impact on teacher practice and on student achievement, making it one of the most efficacious interventions for improved student achievement. In a review of over 60 studies on teacher coaching, primarily focused on literacy coaching, researchers identified coach quality as one major factor in the differential impact of various coaching programs. In other words, coach quality matters to impact on student achievement. The same analysis found that coaching is significantly more effective when paired with related professional development, as opposed to coaching that is unrelated to group-based professional development—or absent it altogether (Kraft, Blazar, Hogan, 2018).

Finally, the role of literacy learning in classes other than ELA/English must be acknowledged. Students in the secondary grades, in particular, are expected to develop disciplinary literacy skills—the ability to read, write, and communicate in ways that are specific to disciplines that they study, such as science, engineering, history, and the arts. The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks integrate literacy in all disciplines, encouraging the development and application of literacy skills in a discipline-specific way in the student’s various academic classes or experiences. Content-area teachers can support student literacy development by designing tasks that integrate literacy skills and dedicating instructional time to disciplinary literacy.

**What Students Need**

Students need instruction based in a **high-quality core curriculum** for ELA/Literacy. It all starts with the texts. Texts in a high-quality core curriculum are:

* Exciting, appealing, and worthy of students’ attention; of publishable quality, in terms writing, illustrations/images, and design
* Rigorous, with appropriate complexity for the grade level
* Representative of various cultures and perspectives, including those which would be culturally relevant
* Representative of varying genres and text types
* Arranged in sets and sequences that help students build knowledge of specific topics and concepts, which can include learning about integrated content-area standards (i.e., STE, History / Social Science, and the Arts) (Steiner, 2017)

Once the texts are in place, high-quality curricula can be designed in many ways, but will consistently exhibit:

* Structures for all students, regardless of reading ability, to read these high-quality, rigorous texts for substantial time every day
* Text-based assignments aligned to standards that require literary or other analysis, including frequent discussion and writing
* Explicit, systematic instruction and opportunities for in-text application of the skills outlined in grade-level foundational reading standards[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Opportunities for and connections to independent reading of materials chosen by students
* Explicit instruction in writing techniques and processes and a wide range of writing tasks, emphasizing writing for a real purpose and audience
* Explicit, systematic instruction of the skills outlined in grade-level language standards, including vocabulary and word study, and opportunities for application of those skills in reading and writing
* Varied means of accessing content and of demonstrating learning (CAST, 2018)
* Informal and formal curriculum-based assessments and rubrics that evaluate student learning and inform upcoming instruction
* Vertical coherence[[4]](#footnote-4)

Putting in place a high-quality curriculum with these features would set any ELA/Literacy classroom up for success. However, materials don’t teach students—teachers do. The great curriculum is only a starting point. Teachers play the essential role of **skillfully implementing** high-quality materials to orchestrate actual student learning. In the classroom, a teacher can utilize high-quality curricular materials and a wide variety of strategies to create:

* *deeper learning.* Deeper learning in ELA/Literacy is characterized by students thinking creatively about topics, texts, and authentic tasks that are compelling and relevant. Motivation is a key aspect of deeper learning: students are offered choice and autonomy about what they read and write. Students receive individualized, mastery-oriented feedback on their writing and reading that invests and empowers them ([Kamil et al, 2008](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/adlit_pg_082608.pdf#page=21); Mehta and Fine, 2019; [CAST, 2018](http://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/recruiting-interest)).
* *equitable access to rigor for all students.* All students, including those who are learning English or are reading below grade-level, can and should access grade-level texts and tasks with purposeful scaffolds and/or accommodations. Teachers consider individual students’ current skill levels, including reading, writing, linguistic, and executive function skills, to develop the minimum accommodations and/or scaffolds that will allow each student to access the text and task successfully.
* *cultural relevance***.** Teachers use students’ cultural knowledge, prior experience, and frames of reference to promote student achievement and affirm and sustain students’ unique identities.Teachers thoughtfully and respectfully integrate students’ cultures, resulting in a classroom environment that is not only equitable, but also fosters feelings of student safety, belonging, and intrinsic motivation (Hammond, 2014). Cultural relevance plays into many teaching decisions, including selection of texts and other curricular materials, design of classroom activities, assessment, and classroom routines and structures.

**Our Current State in Massachusetts**

Quality of core curriculum is currently very mixed across Massachusetts, with many students currently being instructed with a core curriculum in ELA/Literacy that does not meet standards for quality. For instance, at least one K-5 ELA/Literacy curricula that does not meet CURATE[[5]](#footnote-5) expectations for quality has strong market share in Massachusetts.

District-developed curriculum is also common throughout Massachusetts, especially in grades 6-12. This can mean curriculum created in a coordinated way at the district level, curriculum created by teaching teams at schools, or even curriculum created by each individual teacher for his or her own classroom, resulting in a curriculum landscape with so much variance that it is impossible to evaluate quality or to ensure coherence. Students instructed with district-developed curriculum are more likely to experience an incoherent curriculum over time, and the curriculum quality is typically mixed due to the amount of variation (Opfer, Kaufman, and Thomson, 2016). It is particularly difficult for curriculum materials designed by individual teachers or grade-level teams to achieve vertical coherence.

Massachusetts educators frequently identify curriculum as an area where they need more support. In conversations with Massachusetts educators about their current priorities, a majority noted that they are currently focused on improving curriculum in their school or district.[[6]](#footnote-6) On the 2019 statewide [VISTA](http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/vista/2019/) survey of superintendents and principals, a large majority of those leaders (77%) indicated that working towards well-aligned ELA curriculum was a moderate or high priority. In addition, DESE’s [District Review](http://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review/) process, which periodically reviews the practices of every public school district in Massachusetts, identifies curricular rigor as a leading area of improvement statewide.

Skillful implementation of high-quality curricular materials is also a critical need. Professional development is also highly variable across schools and districts in Massachusetts. Because professional development is typically offered at the school or district level, we do not have comprehensive data on the professional development teachers receive. However, Massachusetts educators consistently identify a need for support—including time and high-quality professional development—to learn practices for giving a wide range of learners access to rigorous texts and tasks. When asked what they need in order to improve student achievement, Massachusetts teachers and curriculum leaders frequently asked for resources related to “best instructional practices,” including quick guides and videos. The specific practices most often named included:

* Differentiation
* Rigor for students with a variety of skill levels and developmentally appropriate rigor for young children
* Engaging all learners

There is a strong desire from educators to know not just which instructional practices are effective, but also what is working here in Massachusetts. Numerous educators requested information about “what’s working in MA” as a source of ideas for new practices worth implementing.

Finally, although coaching positions do not currently exist in all Massachusetts public school districts, research increasingly demonstrates the positive impact of coaches on instructional practice and student achievement. Only some Massachusetts schools currently employ coaches on staff, and often those individuals do not receive strong ongoing training, mentoring, and support due to the nature of their position. The opportunity exists to support and promote the effectiveness of the coaches that are currently at work in schools around the Commonwealth.

In the context of this evidence base and the current state in Massachusetts, DESE has set specific goals related to **High Quality Core Instruction**.

High Quality Core Instruction

Goal 3

Support effectiveness of literacy coaches

 (K-8)

Goal 4 Support the teaching of disciplinary literacy in the content areas (6-12)

Goal 2

Promote skillful implementation of high-quality instructional materials through high-quality professional development (K-8)

Goal 1

Promote high-quality core instructional materials

The Center for Instructional Support at DESE will pursue a number of initiatives over the next 3 years to achieve these goals, including but not limited to:

1. Provide reviews of core curriculum products through CURATE (CUrriuclum RAtings by TEachers)
2. Offer *Selecting High-Quality Instructional Materials* network to support districts that are ready to review and select new high-quality materials for ELA/Literacy
3. Offer curriculum-specific professional development open to all educators using selected high-quality curricular materials, to support skillful implementation
4. Coordinate curriculum audit services to assist schools in identifying strengths and gaps in the ELA curriculum (written and/or enacted), including using DESE’s [Text Inventory Tool](http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/impd/)
5. Share resources online to illustrate “High Quality Core Instruction in Action”
	1. Highlight examples of teacher teams in Massachusetts planning with, adapting, and implementing high-quality curricular materials to meet the needs of diverse learners
	2. Share Massachusetts success stories of high-quality curriculum implementation
6. Convene a professional learning network for Literacy Coaches,to support their content and pedagogical knowledge and coaching skill
7. Convene a network of high school ELA instructional leaders to collaboratively improve the quality of ELA curricular materials and implement them successfully with diverse learners
8. Develop resources for disciplinary literacy practices in STEM, Social Studies, and the Arts, and supporting collaboration for educators across disciplines
9. Update DESE definition of high-quality professional development and support districts to identify high-quality third-party professional development
10. Release a set of content-specific, age-appropriate observation tools and provide support for their use with school and district leaders, teams of teachers, and with instructional coaches
11. Convene a network of educator preparation providers to work towards improved novice teacher fluency in the content areas and in the use of high-quality instructional materials

Theme 2:
Evidence-Based
Early Literacy

**Why it Matters**

The term “evidence-based” refers to practices that have been shown, through “well-designed and well-implemented” research, to have a statistically significant and positive impact on student learning in a relevant context. As the US Department of Education points out in recent guidance, teaching practices “supported by higher levels of evidence, specifically strong evidence or moderate evidence, are more likely to improve student outcomes because they have been proven to be effective” (USED, 2016). This is true for all grades and contexts, although our focus will be on early literacy.

Evidence-based early literacy practices are an essential tool for equity. Massachusetts students from historically disadvantaged groups, including students of color and students with disabilities, are substantially less likely to read proficiently by the end of grade 3 as compared to their peers.[[7]](#footnote-7) Failure to read by the end of grade 3 is correlated with a range of negative outcomes, including leaving high school before graduation and decreased lifetime earnings (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). While there are many factors that contribute to the “opportunity gap,” we can set all students up on a path to success by ensuring that they have developed adequate foundational reading skills by grade 3.

Extensive research over decades has generated a robust evidence base for effective practices to support the development of literacy in grades preK-3 (see [Castles, Rastle, and Nation, 2018](https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100618772271), for a summary of this research base). Researchers often assert that virtually all children can learn to read when provided with adequate instruction (Kilpatrick, 2015). However, evidence-based practices do not always translate into schools. Often there is information overload or up-to-date information is not easily accessible, creating a gap between research knowledge and educational practices.

Evidence-based practices have also been the subject of recent legislation in Massachusetts. [*An act relative to students with dyslexia*](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2018/Chapter272) highlighted the pressing need for evidence-based screening assessments and instructional methods, which are shown to reduce or eliminate some reading difficulties.[[8]](#footnote-8) Substantial and ever-increasing evidence exists to inform the design of interventions for students with particular learning difficulties and neurobiological profiles, including dyslexia. For instance, research has demonstrated that students with dyslexia often respond to repeated, multi-sensory practice with phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondence tasks (Kilpatrick, 2015). Using the available evidence is essential, because interventions that are not designed for the student’s specific profile and needs cannot be expected to accelerate learning.

If, as a state, we can collectively close the gap between the scientific knowledge base about literacy learning and actual classroom practice, we can achieve reading proficiency for virtually all children in the Commonwealth by grade 3.

**What Students Need**

Students need instructional and programmatic practices that are supported by evidence. A rich evidence base exists to guide the design of an effective early literacy program, which includes:

* Essential components of reading and skills that must be taught to all students in core instruction.
* Valid assessments used to identify instructional needs and risk for reading difficulties and to monitor progress.
* Approaches to differentiating, scaffolding, and accommodating the core curriculum to create equitable access for all students.
* Evidence-based interventions.
* School and district systems and structures that support progress for all students.

All these elements, taken together, comprise a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). A multi-tiered system of support is a school-wide approach to comprehensively meeting diverse student needs ([National Center on Response to Intervention](https://rti4success.org/essential-components-rti), 2019; Massachusetts Tiered System of Support Blueprint). The efficacy of well-designed multi-tiered systems of support is thoroughly supported by evidence. A state-level initiative in Connecticut, based on implementation of multi-tiered systems of support in elementary schools, has demonstrated significant achievement gains for diverse students at a large scale ([Coyne et al, 2018](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0014402918772791#articleCitationDownloadContainer)). While our focus is on early literacy for the purposes of this plan, it should be noted that the MTSS model is relevant for all grade levels, and secondary students will also benefit from these practices.

The following sections will briefly describe components of MTSS as applied to early literacy.

**Essential components of reading and skills that must be taught to all students in core instruction**. High quality core instruction is the essential starting point for an effective early literacy program. The types of curricular materials and learning experiences students need in core instruction were described in the first section of this document (see pages 6-8: *What Students Need* in High Quality Core Instruction). Specific to early literacy, word-reading skills and development of language are especially important to highlight within the core curriculum.

*Word-reading skills*
Phonological awareness and phonics are key sub-skills that determine a student’s ability to decode words (Kilpatrick, 2015). An explicit, systematic core curriculum of phonological awareness and phonics in the early elementary grades can minimize reading difficulties for many children, including those with neurological characteristics associated with dyslexia (Spear-Swerling, 2018). High-quality core instruction in grades preK-3 will include explicit instruction and active practice with phonemic awareness and phonics skills, using instructional routines whose effectiveness have been verified through research.

*Language comprehension*
Knowing the meaning of words is essential to comprehension of text. Development of vocabulary and knowledge of word and language structures is the second key to early reading development. Virtually all young children can comprehend more words in spoken language than they can read, so oral language is the primary vehicle for encountering, interacting with, and learning new words and language structures for young children. Thus, extensive language-based activities and interactions are an essential component of early elementary classrooms.

It is important to note that we are not advocating learning formats that are often considered inappropriate for young children. Most people feel that kindergarteners should not be sitting through long lessons or completing worksheets. The evidence base also does not support these practices. Rather, the evidence suggests that rigorous learning experiences structured in a developmentally-appropriate way are beneficial for young children both academically and socially (see [Le et al, 2019](https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218813913), for a research synthesis).[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Valid assessments used to identify instructional needs and risk for reading difficulties** **and to monitor progress.** Assessment is essential for multiple purposes. First, screening assessment is needed so that educators may identify students with present or potential reading difficulties. These assessments are crucial for young children so that their particular learning needs may be met instead of “waiting to fail.” Relatedly, progress monitoring assessments are also essential to measure whether and how much students are learning and progressing towards goals. This data allows educators to check the effectiveness of instruction and change course if needed—again, with the aim of preventing unnecessary prolonged struggle ([Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton, 2012](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/25c07c_034c6994661d4b6ea7d52023def55bce.pdf)). Schools must use assessments with demonstrated reliability and validity in measuring the constructs most associated with reading success, including phonological awareness and word-reading fluency (Kilpatrick, 2015).

**Approaches to differentiating, scaffolding, and accommodating the core curriculum to create equitable access for all students.** Teachers must use data from ongoing formative assessment, including student work, to understand students’ current developmental and skill levels. This information can then be used to identify texts or tasks within the core curriculum that will be inaccessible for individual students and to create scaffolds as needed to ensure all students have equitable access. Critically, teachers also use this information to plan small-group or individualized instruction that is aligned with core curriculum but targeted to individual student needs. When this happens not as an “extra” but within core instruction by classroom teachers, we have the strongest evidence of student success (Boudett, City, and Murnane, 2013).

**Evidence-based interventions**. Extensive research has demonstrated the effectiveness of intensive supplemental instruction in reading for those who need it. A recent review of the research from the national Institute of Education Sciences (Gersten et al, 2017) found significant positive impacts of focused reading intervention across a variety of areas (e.g., fluency, word reading, comprehension). Intensive intervention on foundational reading skills for young children identified at risk for reading failure is recommended in the IES Practice Guide [“Assisting Students Struggling with Reading”](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/rti_reading_pg_021809.pdf) with the highest level of confidence due to the rich evidence base (Gersten et al, 2009). Targeted interventions have been shown in countless studies to reduce or even eliminate reading difficulties in young children (Kilpatrick, 2015)—but not all interventions are created equal. Students need instruction using intervention materials or approaches that have been *shown to be effective in similar contexts* (USED, 2016) and that are coherent with the daily curriculum ([Lesaux, 2010](http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/docs_research/10_TurningThePageReport.pdf)) in order for strong results to be expected.

**School and district systems that support progress for all students.** The multi-tiered system must be coordinated at the school and district level—it’s not something that any one teacher or even a grade level team can implement. For example, leaders must ensure appropriate curricular and intervention materials are available to every teacher. Professional development is required so that educators are prepared to provide rigorous core instruction and targeted interventions. Schools must implement routines for data-based decision making, such as systems for collecting data periodically and meeting to make instructional decisions using the data.

**Our Current State in Massachusetts**

In conversations with educators about their priorities and needs, curriculum and instructional leaders very frequently requested information about “best practices” in design of the early literacy program. Educators expressed experiencing a deluge of sometimes-conflicting assertions and recommendations. Furthermore, not all “evidence” is created equal—certain studies yield more reliable evidence based on the type of study and whether the context of the study matches the local context. Educators are seeking support in navigating this complicated landscape to identify the most promising and evidence-based practices that warrant attention.

In discussing their districts’ needs, educators in leadership positions in Massachusetts frequently reported that new teachers in their districts had not been prepared to implement complex early literacy curriculum and instruction. This aligns with national studies suggesting that preparation programs do not consistently teach evidence-based practices for early literacy.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In addition to requests for information about evidence-based instructional practices, needs related to effective assessment and intervention practices also came up frequently. Educators want guidance and support with effective MTSS systems, especially related to managing time/scheduling and data routines. This aligns with recent scholarship identifying the “details” of MTSS (scheduling, staffing, finding time for meetings, etc.) as the most common barrier to high-quality implementation of MTSS in the “real world” (see Coyne at al, 2016; Leonard et al, 2019).

Finally, on the most recent [VISTA](http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/vista/2018/) survey, which asks leaders statewide about their needs, 80% of Principals reported that their school would benefit from support “c*onnecting students with different intensities of academic need to appropriate interventions.”*

The following specific needs were also commonly requested by educators:

* Recommended screening, benchmark, and progress monitoring assessments
* Best practices for formative assessment, including looking at and responding to student work
* Recommended interventions for a variety of purposes, including for students with dyslexia.

In the context of this evidence base and the current state in Massachusetts, DESE has set specific goals related to **Evidence-Based Early Literacy** and designed strategies to work towards those goals over the next 3 years.

The Center for Instructional Support at DESE will pursue a number of initiatives over the next 3 years to achieve these goals, including but not limited to:

1. Develop user-friendly, up-to-date expert guidance describing Evidence-Based Early Literacy practices, reflecting integration of content areas, cultural responsiveness and how young children learn
2. Create Evidence-Based Early Literacy website to house curated research briefs and user-friendly information about evidence-based practices in early literacy
3. Support schools to implement evidence-based practices through the Early Grades Literacy Grant, including though coaching
4. Update the relevant MTEL exams to reflect up-to-date evidence-based knowledge and practices for preK-3 reading
5. Develop resources for educator preparation programs to support the updating of foundational reading courses
6. Provide reviews of “component” curriculum products, such as phonics materials or word study materials, building off the CURATE process used for core curricular materials
7. Pilot screening assessments and provide recommendations for purchasing and implementation
8. Provide an online “menu” of literacy assessments and information about their features and purpose
9. Develop a user-friendly, MA-specific tool for evaluating and selecting intervention materials, based on target population and intended use
10. Offer the [MTSS Tiered Literacy Academy](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfss/prof-develop/mtss-academies.html?section=literacy) to support schools in all aspects of MTSS planning and implementation[[11]](#footnote-11)
11. Support cohorts of schools using a common screening assessment to develop systems and structures for data-based decision making

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1. For example, 4th and 8th grade Hispanic students in numerous states outperformed those in Massachusetts in 2017. Data is available through the [NAEP Data Explorer](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A “core program” is a published comprehensive set of curricular materials that is said to address most or all of the necessary components of a literacy program. While core programs are certainly capable of being high-quality, “core program” is not synonymous with or exclusive to “high-quality, core curricular materials.”

It should be noted that core instruction does not mean monolithic learning experiences for all—even within core instruction, the learning experiences should be universally designed (CAST, 2018) to support access and success for all students. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for ELA/Literacy includes Standards for Foundational Reading that address phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency. These are essential components of reading (National Reading Panel*,* 2001). It is particularly important that students with dyslexia receive explicit, systematic instruction in foundational reading skills, including phonological awareness and phonics. It is often said that these practices are “essential for some, helpful for all.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Vertical coherence is described in the DESE Quick Reference Guide to Ensuring Curricular Coherence: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/impd/qrg-ensuring-coherence.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. CURATE stands for CUrriculum RAtings by TEachers. Through the CURATE project, DESE has partnered with Teach Plus and the Rennie Center to convene panels of Massachusetts teachers to review and rate evidence on the quality and alignment of specific curricular materials. DESE publishes the findings for educators across the Commonwealth to consult. Current product reviews and the rubric used to evaluate the quality of ELA/Literacy curricular materials for CURATE is available here: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/curate/>.
 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As part of developing this plan, staff from DESE’s Office of Literacy and Humanities met with approximately 120 educators to discuss their priorities, needs, goals, and desired supports related to Literacy. Those consulted primarily serve as district-level curriculum leaders (Directors, Coordinators, and Supervisors), and Assistant Superintendents with responsibility for curriculum and instruction. Teachers and principals also provided input. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For instance, on the 2018 ELA MCAS, 59% of white third-graders in Massachusetts met or exceeded expectations, as compared to 34% of Black and Hispanic/Latino students. 60% of third-graders without disabilities met expectations, as compared to 17% of students with disabilities.
 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This legislation requires the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to "issue guidelines to assist districts in developing screening procedures or protocols for students that demonstrate one or more potential indicators of a neurological learning disability, including, but not limited to, dyslexia." More detail about the state-level work related to dyslexia in Massachusetts is available [here](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/links/dyslexia.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. DESE’s other resources related to Early Childhood Education, including the [Approaches to Play and Learning](http://www.doe.mass.edu/kindergarten/resources.html#standards) standards, describe the types of active learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and supportive for young children. High-quality curriculum materials for young children utilize these developmentally-appropriate approaches by design. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The audio documentary [Hard Words](https://www.apmreports.org/story/2018/09/10/hard-words-why-american-kids-arent-being-taught-to-read) (2018) brought notoriety to this phenomenon nationally. Third-party reviews, such as [this one from the National Center on Teacher Quality](https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/2018_Databurst_Full_List), have found many teacher preparation programs to lack grounding in evidence-based practices. The cognitive scientist Mark Seidenberg discusses the disconnect between scientific evidence and teacher preparation in his book *Language at the Speed of Sight* (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This Academy is offered through DESE’s [Systems for Student Success](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfss/) office and is open to schools involved with the Statewide System of Support. The Academy welcomes schools serving students in K-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)