

To: The School Board of Alexandria City Public School

From: Special Education Advisory Committee

CC: Literacy Department

Date: June 11, 2021

Subject: K-2 Literacy Recommendations

Purpose

The purpose of this memo is to outline the key recommendations from the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) to facilitate an inclusive and equitable environment regarding K-2 literacy in the general education setting.

Summary

The Special Education Advisory Committee has compiled vital recommendations, including a Multi-Tiered System of Support approach, educator training, support, implementation with fidelity and accountability systems, and communication and support for families regarding progress and services. This memo outlines the elements that will create a rigorous and results-driven K-2 literacy program that will benefit all students throughout the early elementary years. Benefits can include proper interventions to correctly identify students with disabilities by providing the appropriate interventions and support systems before receiving referrals for special education.

Additionally, all recommendations support and target the following goals of the ACPS 2025 Strategic Plan:

- **Academic Excellence and Educational Equity:** Every student will be academically successful and prepared for life, work, and college.
- **Family and Community Engagement:** ACPS will partner with families and the community in the education of Alexandria's youth.
- **Facilities and the Learning Environment:** ACPS will provide optimal and equitable learning environments.

Background

The Special Education Advisory Committee had a chance to meet with Dr. Carolyn Wooster, Elementary Literacy Coordinator for ACPS, and Kimberly Schell, ACPS Literacy Coordinator, and Secondary Literacy. The meeting included a discussion about the K-2 Literacy plan and an opportunity to ask questions. Following the meeting, SEAC members completed a survey provided by Dr. Wooster regarding literacy priorities. The Special Education Advisory Committee respectfully requests that ACPS support the following critical elements for the K-2 Literacy initiative to be successful, inclusive, and equitable to all students in the early years of learning.

I. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

First and foremost, SEAC believes it is essential to have a curriculum encompassing a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) approach. MTSS is defined by the IRIS Center (2019) as: "A model approach to instruction that provides increasingly intensive and individualized levels of support for academics (e.g., response to intervention or RTI) and for behavior (e.g., Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or PBIS)¹." MTSS includes three tiers of support where students have the opportunity to flow in and out of tiers as content is presented and learning challenges arise.

"Tier 1 – All students receive effective, differentiated instruction provided by a classroom teacher using evidence-based core curriculum. Tier 1 is expected to bring approximately 80% of students to acceptable levels of proficiency.

Tier 2 – For students who don't respond effectively to Tier 1 instruction, Tier 2 supplements core instruction using targeted, evidence-based small-group interventions to help them catch up. This supplemental instruction is expected to bring up to 15% of students to proficient levels.

Tier 3 – Involves the application of intensive, evidence-based interventions which are designed to increase the rate of student progress for the approximately 5% of students who need very intensive 1:1 intervention²."



The 2018 Students with Disabilities Audit, completed for ACPS by Public Consulting Group (PCG), emphasized the need to ensure strong MTSS processes across the district. There is much research on the benefits of MTSS, one crucial benefit being students receive interventions earlier and are less likely to fall behind if implemented with fidelity. Also, as students learn and grow, different concepts can be challenging for students, but they still can succeed given the resources, intervention, and support. Some of the resources to support these efforts include, but are not limited to:

A. Universal Design for Learning & Multisensory Approach

With MTSS, some resources that benefit students use Universal Design for Learning. "Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn³." The UDL approach focuses on

¹[https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/rti-math/cresource/q1/p01/#:~:text=x-,multi%2Dtiered%20system%20of%20support%20\(MTSS\),Interventions%20and%20Supports%20or%20PBIS\).](https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/rti-math/cresource/q1/p01/#:~:text=x-,multi%2Dtiered%20system%20of%20support%20(MTSS),Interventions%20and%20Supports%20or%20PBIS).)

² <https://www.fastbridge.org/assessments/mtssrti/>

³ <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

removing barriers to learning and can also be effective for students learning to write, especially those for whom small motor skills are weak.

One way to ensure learning is optimized with K-2 Literacy is to involve a multi-sensory approach. Meaning there would be a focus on all senses (taste, smell, touch, sight, hearing, and movement)⁴ to allow students to have opportunities to experience letters, text, and stories in multiple ways. As children are still developing and growing at a young age, it is imperative to give students multiple means of representation to learn content to support their growth as readers.

B. Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

“Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of words. The levels of phonological awareness are syllables, onset–rime, and phonemes. Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. We know that a student's skill in phonological awareness is a good predictor of later reading success or difficulty⁵.” Both phonological and phonemic awareness are necessary building blocks that allow students to be successful with reading and are essential components of an appropriate division-wide curriculum. Additionally, SEAC recommends investing in an explicit and highly structured phonics curriculum to support students in all tiers, including tiers 2 and 3.

II. Education Preparation and Training

As educators are given multiple tasks and responsibilities, SEAC believes it is imperative that they are given the support and training needed for the implementation to be highly effective for all students. Some key recommendations to support educators throughout this new training are the following:

A. Coaching and Specialist Support

Educators should have the support and resources needed to be successful in implementing a new curriculum or content. If a teacher is struggling in any area, there should be an opportunity to reach out for resources, direct coaching, shadow other educators, and/or have a mentor to assist with the more challenging content. Again, as educators are tasked with many different responsibilities, they need to be offered a transparent support system for all parties to be successful for the program to truly be successful.

B. Teacher Training “Toolkits”

Many educators have a classroom of 17+ students, meaning 17+ different needs. As the individualized instruction is given, educators should have the resources to provide supplemental material needed. Regarding MTSS, students in each Tier should be receiving the instruction required to be successful. The more accessible the “toolkit” of resources, interventions, manipulatives, books, and other content is for educators, the more accessible it will be to students. Additionally, books available to students should include ones that present grade-level science and social studies content being culturally relevant to support the interest and learning of all students. Additionally, all students should have access to books that are culturally relevant and that present grade-level science and social studies content at their reading level.

⁴<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childs-school/instructional-strategies/multi-sensory-instruction-what-you-need-to-know>

⁵ <https://www.readingrockets.org/reading-topics/phonological-and-phonemic-awareness>

C. Consider the use of Highly Trained Tutors to Provide Intervention (The Literacy Lab, City Year, and other outside partners if appropriate)

Highly qualified tutors or paraprofessionals can support educators and students in the classroom during the literacy period. Educators can lean on others to help students while they are receiving rigorous instruction and interventions. Through this system, students have an opportunity to learn from a variety of adults to support their reading needs. Currently, ACPS' Mount Vernon Community School partners with The Literacy Lab, a non-profit organization that provides individualized reading intervention to at-risk students in grades K-3. MVCS has one full-time tutor that will work with 12-15 students each day. This tutor is trained in intensive reading interventions and progress monitoring. SEAC highly recommends identifying the partnership results, how the extension of partnerships might help students, and how the Literacy department can continue collaborating and supporting these partnerships.

III. Implementation with Fidelity

Another important element is the data collection and implementation of any K-2 Literacy program with fidelity. For the program to be implemented, fidelity checks and data collection are imperative to ensure the program's success. Areas to consider when looking at assessments are the following:

A. Progress monitoring process

“The purpose of monitoring progress is to determine the effectiveness of an intervention plan on student learning. When data show students are progressing, interventions are maintained until students meet identified goals. When data show students are not progressing, a change in intervention is necessary (Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs & Davis, 2008). When changes are made to intervention plans based on data, intervention or phase lines should be placed on student graphs to indicate the change. Students receiving Tier 2 support should be assessed weekly or every other week, while students receiving Tier 3 support should be assessed weekly⁶.” Alexandria Public City Schools should consider creating a schedule for progress monitoring academic skills accessible to families and community members (See Table below for example)⁷.

Academics	Suggested Timeline	Instrument / Assessment Used	Person Responsible
Tier 1	<i>Universal Screening: 3 times per year (beginning, middle, end) for all students K-8</i>	NWEA - MAP	Classroom Teacher
	<i>Individual Screening: As high school students are referred for tier 2 or 3 support</i>	EasyCBM	Interventionist
Tier 2	<i>Monitor Progress: Twice monthly (more often as concern increases, may need multiple assessments for reliability)</i>	EasyCBM (K-8) Common content areas assessments (9-12)	Classroom Teacher
Tier 3	<i>Monitor Progress: Weekly</i>	EasyCBM	Interventionist

B. Data Committee Review

⁶ <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/research/progress-monitoring-within-a-rti-model>

⁷ <https://www.branchingminds.com/what-does-progress-monitoring-look-like-in-response-to-intervention#:~:text=The%20purpose%20of%20monitoring%20progress,intervention%20plan%20on%20student%20learning.&text=When%20changes%20are%20made%20to,graphs%20to%20indicate%20the%20change.>

Implementing systems in places such as data meetings and professional learning committees will allow division-wide collaboration to assess student's progress and area of need. The following is a suggested outline that can be beneficial when considered implementing an MTSS with fidelity:

- School-Wide Improvement Meetings: Quarterly;
- Universal Data Screen Review Meetings: Fall, Winter, and Spring;
- Grade Content/Content collaborative teacher meetings: Monthly;
- Building Leadership Team Coordination Meetings: Quarterly;
- Intervention Planning Meetings: every 4-6 weeks⁸.

C. Implementation Strategies

“Fidelity refers to how closely prescribed procedures are followed and, in the context of schools, the degree to which educators implement programs, assessments, and implementation plans the way they were intended. When we implement interventions and assessments with fidelity, intervention teams can make more accurate decisions about an individual student's progress and future intervention needs. In addition, fidelity of implementation to the data-based individualization (DBI) process as a whole, across multiple students in a school, helps to ensure that staff have the necessary resources and processes in place to support strong implementation for individual students⁹.”

When considering an implementation approach to ensure fidelity, one area that could be helpful is adapting a rubric approach to ensure that support and the infrastructure necessary for successful implementation¹⁰.

D. Interventions

Lastly, it is crucial to identify the appropriate interventions and supports needed for a

successful K-2 Literacy plan. As students move in and out of each tier through whole group instruction, small group, and one-on-one support, it is vital to ensure that the interventions are appropriate within each setting. Educators may need help implementing accommodations and/or interventions. Having a division-wide approach to system(s), tools, and teaching strategies can support teachers and students.

IV. Communication and Support for Families

A. Communication and Understanding of Interventions

Throughout the K-2 Literacy process, SEAC feels that family members should be kept up-to-date with the learning process occurring in the classroom. When the new K-2 literacy program starts, including families is a crucial element to ensure the success and support of the system. When students receive interventions, families should be aware of the interventions used, the deficits targeted, updates regarding effectiveness, and appropriate next steps. One idea to consider is a “simple check the box” of addressed challenges, interventions used, and progress achieved. This communication eliminates additional paperwork for

⁸ <https://www.pbis.org/topics/school-wide>

⁹ <https://intensiveintervention.org/implementation-support/fidelity-resources>

¹⁰ https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Special-Education-Services/Documents/MTSS/MTSS_Fidelity_Rubric.pdf

educators, opens communication for families, and systematizes data and progress tracking.

B. At home support for Families

Additionally, SEAC would like to see guidance and tools for families to assist with their child's literacy development at home. As their opportunity to support their child's learning may vary, we believe there should be an opportunity for independent learning. The ability to have multiple means of representation throughout homework (UDL) provides a chance to engage learners outside of the school setting. Some key components that would be helpful to consider are the following areas:

- a. Specific guided activities;
- b. Sight Word Practice;
- c. Accessibility through digital or physical resources;
- d. Tutoring options;
- e. Accessibility to books.

Conclusion

SEAC is thankful for your time and consideration in reviewing our memo regarding critical recommendations of the K-2 Literacy. SEAC knows that ACPS currently implements many of these systems and practices and encourages ACPS to continue to implement these practices, considering new ideas and opportunities to strengthen learning access for all students. Also, SEAC has taken many steps to include the ideas of the Literacy Department, SEAC community through surveys, and Specialized Instruction Department to compile recommendations that will enhance inclusion and accessibility of reading to all students. Recommendations in this memo include a Multi-Tiered System of Support approach, educator training, support, implementation with fidelity and accountability systems, and communication and support for families regarding progress and services. As the K-2 literacy initiative is underway, this is an excellent opportunity to support all learners and work towards the goals of the Alexandria City Public Schools 2025 Strategic Plan.