



Maryland READS Comments on MSDE's Draft Literacy Policy

July 19, 2024

CONTENTS

- About Maryland READS
- Our Key Takeaways
- Maryland READS Seven Part Action Plan
- Major Insights

See Complete Version for Additional Details Including:

- Description of Process
- Major Discussion Topics
- About Retention Policies
- READS Roundtable Attendee Makeup
- List of all Questions Posed Organized by Category
- Summary of Literacy Policy Shared with Attendees



ABOUT MARYLAND READS

Background on Maryland READS

Maryland READS is a non-profit organization that was founded to end the literacy crisis in Maryland. In 2021, a cross section of individuals came together, motivated by their deep concern with the ten-year decline in reading proficiency rates in Maryland that was largely being ignored. Our mission is to improve the effectiveness of reading instruction to meet the diverse academic, cultural, and linguistic needs of every student. We do this by using research, data, and evidence of best practices to drive conversations, inform decisions, and engage stakeholders and policymakers in implementing approaches designed for impact.

Our approach is changing the culture of how Marylanders think about reading by bringing together stakeholders in our communities who work both inside and outside of the classroom and providing them with a platform and support to build their capacity and impact. We focus on building systems of support through three proven paths to closing the literacy gap:

1. Improve reading instruction through the Science of Reading;
2. Build thriving reading ecosystems; and
3. Address barriers to reading proficiency.

Through collaboration and strategic partnerships, Maryland READS is building a powerful statewide network to provide state and community leaders and stakeholders with a place to engage, share best practices, advocate, and shape their action plans to ensure all children have the literacy skills necessary for success in school and beyond. We have high expectations because we know every child is capable of becoming a proficient reader and we feel the urgency to act because Maryland is 40th in the nation in reading proficiency, which is unacceptable.



OUR KEY TAKEAWAYS

This is not a comprehensive literacy plan that addresses the needs of all students in our elementary and secondary education systems but rather a reading instruction plan for K - 3rd grade. A comprehensive literacy plan should focus on instructional strategies throughout elementary, middle, and high school; building thriving reading ecosystems that reinforce the instruction in the classroom; and addressing barriers to reading proficiency. Through our ongoing policy conversations with our growing network, we found that these semantics matter and below we offer our overarching takeaways to help inform the development of a true comprehensive literacy plan. In addition, we are including the seven part action plan from our inaugural report, [The State of Reading in Maryland 2024: The Silent Crisis of our Ten Year Decline](#).

Following these recommendations, we also include the summaries from the two virtual sessions we conducted with members of our network that represent a cross section of Maryland stakeholders.

- **Include a focus on middle and high school.** The current draft lacks a meaningful discussion of immediate action to support current students in middle and high school and instead focuses on kindergarten through grade three. We understand the rationale of investing in structural improvements to improve foundational reading instruction in the early grades. However, our state has failed an entire generation of students over the last decade. If we do not act swiftly to meet the needs of our existing middle and high school students, we will fail yet another generation of students. This will be even more important in January when the next round of NAEP scores are released that will include data on 10th grade reading proficiency rates. Furthermore, as a state with a large population of newcomers, we also need to recognize the needs of 4th and 5th grade students entering our school systems from outside of our state.
- **Retention:** Retention policies elicit strong reactions and, in the course of our conversations, we found that many individuals have varying understanding of existing research and hold many assumptions about the process and timetable for enacting these policies.
 - **Clarify Research:** MSDE should identify the research and evidence base that underlie the actions they will execute to implement a retention policy.
 - **Communicate Target Timeline:** In our conversations, there were assumptions being made about the timetable for implementing a retention policy. We assume that any retention policy will be launched only after MSDE has successfully deployed the supports that were identified in their draft so that retention is truly a policy of last resort. Clarifying the intended timeline will help alleviate concerns and prevent erroneous assumptions.

- **Explore Alternative Approaches for Retention:** The rate at which children become proficient readers varies. Because a child struggles to learn to read does not mean that they can never master foundational reading skills. Instead, they may simply need a slower pace and more direct instruction. In our conversations, our network shared their concerns regarding the social impact to children who are retained in 3rd grade and other concerns with respect to stigma. It is our recommendation that MSDE explore alternative approaches to retention. For example, in a recent conversation with Tennessee stakeholders, they shared the possibility of retaining students in earlier grades in order to ensure students master foundational skills and that the negative impact of retention is lessened.
- **Focus on Transparency and Trust:** When the draft policy was released, MSDE did not provide a description of the process that was used to create the draft nor the process that would unfold to develop a final version for approval by the State Board. In fact, there were several news articles that created a perception that the policy being submitted to the State Board on July 23rd would be a final version with a request for approval. The lack of clear timelines allowed misinformation and distrust to take root. Further, the concerns we heard with respect to the retention policy were often rooted in a lack of faith that the support described in the plan would be adequate and timely. This lack of trust is a direct result of the erosion of our state systems over the last decade. While we appreciate and applaud the sense of urgency guiding MSDE's approach, taking time for authentic stakeholder engagement is an important step to building trust. People are more willing to support innovative and controversial policies when there is trust in leadership.

It is impressive that just ten months after Dr. Carey Wright was appointed Superintendent of the Maryland State Department of Education, her agency has crafted a comprehensive approach to improving reading instruction in Maryland schools. However, improving reading instruction is just one strategy to address our reading crisis. Success will not come from what happens in the classroom alone. Families with students who are furthest from meeting standards will look to their local ecosystems for support. We look forward to further conversations about how a comprehensive state literacy policy can connect to the ecosystem work unfolding in our local communities. A movement is building of energetic and motivated people who are willing to work together to improve reading outcomes for all students across our state of Maryland. We encourage you to leverage this movement.

The Maryland READS Seven-Part Action Plan



Shift Our Approach

Embrace the Science of Reading across our state. Prioritize teaching approaches and tactics that are rooted in Science of Reading research and evidence.³²



Improve Instruction

Improve core reading instruction, by giving our existing teachers consistent, comprehensive, and job-embedded professional learning opportunities coupled with high-quality research-based instructional materials.



Build Better Data and Progress Monitoring Systems

Improve how we collect, select, and analyze data and how we train educators to use it to monitor student progress so they can identify students who are struggling to read as early as possible and provide immediate, targeted, and effective support.



Intervene Early and Effectively for All Students

Provide interventions for struggling readers at all levels, from the early elementary years all the way through high school, because students of all ages are still acquiring and refining reading skills.



Develop Leadership Capacity

Train our principals and those who supervise them in the Science of Reading so they understand the research, how teachers are being asked to change their practices, and how they can create supportive environments that help teachers become more effective.



Create a Thriving Reading Ecosystem

Build a thriving reading ecosystem that includes a coherent state system of support, community resources that encourage and nourish research-based strategies for students, and education and advice for parents so they can also reinforce what districts are doing to help children become thriving readers



Invest in the Next Generation

Prepare the next generation of teachers and administrators. Align teacher preparation programs to the Science of Reading, ensure that all elements of Balanced Literacy and Whole Language Instruction are removed from the curriculum, inspire faculty to improve reading instruction curriculum, and hold their leaders accountable for progress.



MAJOR INSIGHTS

Maryland READS Roundtable Summary

(extended notes [here](#))

Session 1: July 9th, 2024

Positive remarks included: MSDE's 'seriousness', 'strong language', and providing definition for terminology likely unfamiliar to some.

Concerns expressed were:

- The time at which interventions would take place during the school day (so as not to interfere with crucial activities such as physical ed. and/or the arts),
- The reliability of ARTC (alternative route) teachers, who are frequently inexperienced and arguably unsuitable for the responsibility of teaching students how to read during their most formative years.
- The absence of language on addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion, since these retention 'roadblocks' are inevitably biased towards people of color.
- What is MSDE's definition of a reading deficiency and who specifically is in charge of determining what constitutes one or not?
- Why isn't there any information on older readers?

In general, attendees agreed that the literacy policy should be more specific in terms of how they plan to accomplish their goals, and a timeline for when they plan to do so (schools need sufficient time to train teachers, on-site coaches, etc. to prepare BEFORE being held accountable).

Session 2: July 11th, 2024

Attendees were impressed by MSDE's tone and signaling of a serious initiative, which was previously absent. In addition, parent involvement as being integral to the policy, was well received.

Common concerns included:

- A lack of explanation of details regarding funding, resource allocation, and timeline.
- Concern for retention being the crux, and specifically, how we need to be targeting children as young as in kindergarten, as opposed to 3rd grade. A principal communicated that, "no child really should leave kindergarten without having some level of ability to read."
- People noted there is nothing mentioned in the policy on students in high school or in secondary education; multiple attendees wanted to see more in the policy about older learners
- Another desire was for the policy to include information on interventions for multilingual older learners.