



▶ IT'S TIME TO REFRAME THE CONVERSATION ABOUT MARYLAND'S LITERACY POLICY



The Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) draft literacy policy aims to establish a framework to support students and teachers. Yet, the conversation around this policy has been dominated by the issue of retention. By doing so, we are overlooking its broader intent: creating a robust support system.

With the Maryland State Board of Education set to discuss the policy on Aug. 27, it's time we shift our focus to what truly matters: preparing and empowering our children to become fluent readers.

MSDE's draft policy seeks to tackle the reading crisis by addressing far more than the potential retention of students. It seeks to equip teachers with the tools, training and resources they need to foster foundational reading skills in every child, track their progress and provide strategic, targeted interventions when necessary. The draft policy includes several critical components designed to achieve this goal, yet these have been largely overlooked in the public discourse.

One of the most vital aspects of the draft policy is how it leverages the Ready to Read Act with its emphasis on early screening and assessment. Historically, teachers have lacked resources and guidance to identify and address reading deficiencies early on. The draft policy aims to change that by providing a step-by-step guide that helps teachers flag students who may be at risk, identify the specific skills they need to develop, and target the support students need.

Another cornerstone of the policy is the emphasis on professional learning and coaching. Diagnostics are only effective if teachers know how to use the results to inform instruction. The draft policy outlines a plan for ongoing professional development to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to support students at every stage. Training and support, with regard to the science of reading, must be provided to all teachers of reading, pre-K to 12 in order for the data to translate into improved student outcomes.

The draft policy also introduces the concept of a Student Reading Improvement Plan. This plan is designed to be a collaborative effort between teachers and parents, ensuring that everyone involved in a child's education is on the same page. To bridge the gap between the technical language used by educators and what parents can easily understand, MSDE is developing a toolkit that educators can use to communicate more effectively with parents.

While much of the debate has centered on retention, it's crucial to understand that this policy is as much about prevention as it is about intervention. Perhaps retaining students may indeed prevent those who lack foundational reading skills from advancing and ultimately falling through the cracks. We say "may" because we acknowledge the research is complex and the findings are mixed.

However, if the state adopts a retention approach, it must be implemented with great care. Retention should be strategically designed as a last-resort intervention, after all other support measures have been exhausted.

In some cases, retention might be a more effective short-term solution than advancing students who are not prepared, as long as additional time and support are provided. And, we should recognize that the retention component of the policy may incentivize districts to collaborate closely with the MSDE, ensuring shared responsibility for implementing a comprehensive system of support for all students.

Finally, if we are serious about addressing the reading crisis, we need to extend our focus beyond early elementary grades. Middle and high school students who lack foundational reading skills require targeted interventions to help them catch up. This will extend to students who may be advancing to high grades without the foundational skills needed to master challenging texts. The conversation about retention should therefore include discussions about how we support older students who have fallen behind.

MSDE's draft literacy policy represents a comprehensive statewide approach to improving literacy. However, the public discourse has been too narrowly focused on the issue of retention, neglecting the critical support that the policy seeks to provide. It's time we change this conversation and recognize the full scope of the policy's potential. It's a straightforward approach that, if implemented correctly, could have a significant impact on literacy outcomes for all Maryland students.

By focusing on assessments, comprehensive professional development and coaching, and better parental engagement, we can create a system that not only addresses the reading crisis but also ensures that every child in Maryland has the opportunity to become a fluent, confident reader. An ongoing dialogue with MSDE to learn how they are responding to the feedback they received is essential to building public trust and educators' buy-in to the final policy.

ABOUT MARYLAND READS

Maryland READS is a non-profit organization that was founded to end the literacy crisis in Maryland. Based on the most current rigorous research and evidence of impact, Maryland READS focuses on three proven paths to closing the literacy gap: improving reading instruction in the classroom through the Science of Reading; creating thriving community-based reading ecosystems outside the classroom; and addressing barriers that prevent students from becoming proficient readers like addictive technology. Through collaboration and strategic partnerships, Maryland READS is building a powerful statewide network to provide community leaders 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. Learn more about our growing reading network at marylandreads.org