

# Maryland READS Special Report

February 26, 2026

## Comments on MSDE's Draft Adolescent Literacy Policy

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## ▶ ABOUT 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 about 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-based practices to drive conversations, inform decisions, and engage stakeholders and policymakers in implementing approaches designed for impact.

Our approach is changing how Marylanders think about reading by convening stakeholders both inside and outside the classroom and providing the platform and support needed to strengthen their capacity and impact. We focus on building systems of support through three proven paths to closing the literacy gap:



In addition to our commitment to inform and support the development of MSDE's Adolescent Literacy Policy, Maryland READS has been making the case to support the establishment of a statewide literacy coaching program because **implementation — not policy alone — drives results**. While MSDE is currently focused on prioritizing literacy coaches for elementary schools, the feedback from our network has made clear that consistent, high-quality coaching is also needed in middle and high schools.

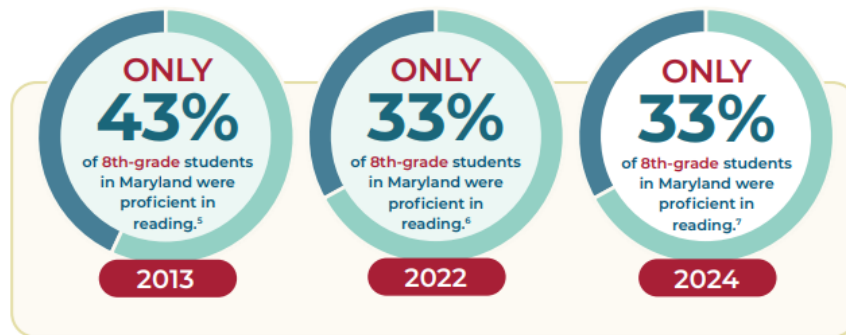
Instructional coaching is one of the most effective levers for strengthening teacher practice, accelerating student achievement, and building the literacy foundation Maryland's workforce goals depend on. If the state is serious about improving outcomes for students, sustained coaching across grade levels must be part of the strategy to improve reading proficiency.



## WHY THIS MATTERS FOR MARYLAND

Maryland's literacy challenge is not only an educational issue, it is an economic risk. As Governor Moore emphasized in his State of the State address, Maryland is working to grow high-demand industries, including technology, health care, and emerging fields like AI. These sectors require a workforce grounded in strong reading, writing, and analytical skills.

Yet current outcomes tell a different story. According to the most recent NAEP results, 67% of eighth-grade students are not reading proficiently, and high school trends continue to decline nationally. These are not just academic statistics — they are indicators of workforce readiness. **If the majority of students are not reading proficiently by middle school, we cannot realistically expect them to thrive in postsecondary education, technical training, or high-growth career pathways.**



**“I want every student to be career-ready before they get their high school diploma.”**

**-Governor Wes Moore 2026 State of the State Address**

Preparing students to be career-ready begins before high school graduation. In elementary school, students must learn to read fluently and comprehend complex texts so that reading becomes a tool for learning across subjects and developing critical thinking. As students enter middle and high school, literacy demands become more complex and applied. They must be able to navigate technical manuals, job applications, workplace documents, contracts, data tables, and digital content—the texts that shape adult life and opportunity.

Maryland's labor force includes nearly 2.8 million workers, with health care, technology, professional services, and government among the state's largest employment sectors. At the same time, the Maryland Higher Education Commission and state labor officials continue to identify priority occupations that require postsecondary education, technical training, and strong reading and writing skills. **These are not abstract academic skills; they are essential workforce competencies.** Strong literacy instruction ensures that Maryland students are prepared for the demands of a competitive economy and well equipped for any direction they choose to take in their lives.



## OUR KEY TAKEAWAYS

This policy draft represents an important step forward, but our review and stakeholder engagement **identify key areas that must be strengthened to drive consistent, statewide gains in literacy**. We recommend strengthening the policy by naming the values that anchor the work, investing in educator capacity to act on assessment data, establishing enforceable accountability, clarifying intervention along with student and family communication pathways, and addressing literacy across K-12—including writing and supports for students currently behind.

These recommendations are grounded in our examination of the draft policy and ongoing conversations with our growing network of educators, families, community leaders, and literacy stakeholders across Maryland. In listening sessions, participants consistently emphasized that clarity, feasibility, and accountability will determine whether this policy results in meaningful change or uneven implementation. Below, we synthesize that input into actionable recommendations to support MSDE and the State Board in strengthening the final policy and ensuring successful implementation.

- **Statewide Coaching:** A comprehensive literacy strategy must prioritize implementation. The current approach does not yet outline a sustained coaching model for middle and high schools, where literacy demands intensify. We recommend establishing a statewide coaching framework with clear expectations and support across grades K-12. Strengthening instructional coaching across the continuum will accelerate student achievement and ensure Maryland's literacy goals translate into measurable results.
- **Explicit Values and Clear Expectations:** To strengthen alignment and implementation statewide, we recommend that the final policy clearly articulate the values guiding Maryland's literacy reform. We've provided a proposed list of values in the appendix. Because policy shapes behavior, priorities, and practice, naming these commitments upfront gives districts, educators, and families a shared foundation for decision-making and action. Without this clarity, implementation risks becoming procedural rather than transformational. This clarity will enable Maryland to move forward with unified expectations and shared responsibility for results.
- **Teacher Training and Implementation Support:**
  - **Equip teachers to use data effectively:** Universal screening improves outcomes only when teachers can translate assessment results into instruction. Educators must understand the Science of Reading, accurately interpret literacy data, and apply targeted, evidence-based instructional strategies in response.

- **Sustained Training and Coaching:** To make this possible, the policy should require ongoing Science of Reading training and coaching for all teachers—including content-area and secondary educators. **The responsibility for teaching students to read is not confined to early grades;** teachers across disciplines must be trained to recognize foundational skill gaps and be equipped accordingly.
- **Implementation Supports for Screening and Intervention:** The policy should also clearly define the supports educators will receive to implement screening, intervention, and progress monitoring with fidelity. **With the right training, tools, and coaching, screening becomes instructional action—not compliance—**and classroom practice can shift in ways that meaningfully improve student outcomes.
- **Comprehensive K–12 Focus:** While it is positive that Tier 1 instruction appears in the current draft, there is limited clarity about what high-quality adolescent literacy instruction should look like in content-area classrooms. Section A.1.a lists foundational skills, but does not clearly translate them into daily instructional practice, and Section A.1.c would benefit from expanded guidance grounded in evidence-based practices such as the IES Practice Guides.
  - More broadly, **a comprehensive literacy policy must address both early-grade intervention and targeted support for older students who have not yet reached proficiency.** The draft does not yet outline a clear, actionable strategy for students in grades 4–12—especially those who need accelerated support now. We recommend explicit expectations and supports for middle and high school literacy improvement. Strengthening Tier 1 instruction across the K–12 continuum will improve outcomes for both current students and future cohorts.
- **Accountability and Enforcement:** To ensure consistent implementation, the policy should include clear, enforceable accountability measures. It should specify how districts will be monitored, how training and implementation fidelity will be tracked, and how progress toward defined benchmarks will be reviewed—along with defined supports or corrective actions when expectations are not met. Transparent reporting and precise language will strengthen statewide consistency. Accountability must also be paired with capacity by outlining the state supports districts will need, particularly where staffing and materials are limited, to prevent uneven implementation and widening gaps.

- **Assessments:** The current draft includes assessment requirements but does not clearly define what must occur once student need is identified. We recommend outlining clear action pathways that connect screening to timely instructional adjustments, aligned Tier 1–3 supports, and a defined process for moving from intervention to evaluation when progress is not demonstrated. The policy should also specify the structures and accountability measures necessary to make “all teachers are literacy teachers” actionable in practice. Finally, while retention may be one lever, it is insufficient on its own; the policy should require timely supports and alternative instructional approaches before high-stakes consequences are considered.
- **Family & Community Involvement:** We recommend clarifying intervention expectations and establishing consistent structures and tools for family communication, involvement, and accountability—so parents understand screening results, support plans, and how to reinforce progress at home. We also recommend strengthening community-based literacy ecosystems by engaging libraries, community schools, and local organizations to build a culture of reading and support beyond the classroom. Finally, we recommend incorporating a justice lens by affirming students’ home languages and dialects as assets and setting expectations for culturally sustaining reading and writing so that students see themselves reflected in instruction.
  - **Student Empowerment and Advocacy: We recommend that the policy establish clear expectations to ensure students understand their reading progress and learning needs, are informed of any identified learning differences or disabilities, know what resources and accommodations are available, and are equipped to advocate for the supports they need, particularly at the high school level.** Preparing students for adulthood requires not only literacy proficiency, but also the ability to navigate systems and access support effectively.
- **Defined Outcomes:** To strengthen statewide consistency and impact, we recommend clearly defining intended outcomes. This should include specific success metrics and a plan to accelerate students who are behind through targeted supports. The policy should also more directly address learning differences beyond dyslexia—including dysgraphia and other specific learning disabilities—so expectations and supports are clear. Finally, we recommend elevating writing alongside reading and defining outcomes that reflect life readiness, including preparation for postsecondary pathways, employment, and adult responsibilities such as applications, financial literacy, and civic participation. Clear outcomes will strengthen consistency, accountability, and long-term impact across districts.

- Creative Ideas:
    - While not all ideas raised during our community convening translate directly into policy language, the discussion highlighted important opportunities to make literacy instruction more relevant, engaging, and effective for middle and high school students. Participants recommended embedding reading into practical, real-world experiences— such as semester-long courses where students apply reading skills by interpreting and executing recipes in hands-on cooking labs, analyzing instructions and ingredients, or practicing how to complete job applications and other everyday documents.
    - These applied learning experiences make literacy tangible, meaningful, and directly connected to students' independence, confidence, and future readiness.
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We recognize that this draft policy represents meaningful progress, and we commend MSDE's urgency in addressing Maryland's literacy crisis. Lasting improvement will require more than policy intent; it will demand clear values and measurable outcomes, sustained support for educators, enforceable accountability, and clear implementation pathways that translate assessment into effective instruction and timely intervention. Success will also depend on meaningful partnership with students, families, and a community-based ecosystems that reinforce literacy beyond the classroom.

A statewide movement is already underway— educators, families, and stakeholders are mobilizing to strengthen literacy outcomes across Maryland. MSDE and the State Board now have the opportunity to adopt a final policy that is ambitious, actionable, and centered on preparing students for academic success, graduation, and postsecondary opportunities.

It must be a priority for our young people to graduate with the literacy skills that give them agency, expand their choices, and ensure they are fully equipped for whatever future they choose to pursue.



## APPENDIX

### DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS

#### Maryland READS Process for Developing Comments for the Draft Literacy Policy

Maryland READS undertook an inclusive approach to gather feedback in response to the Maryland State Department of Education's new draft literacy policy. Recognizing the importance of informed and comprehensive input in shaping effective policy, we structured our process to involve multiple stakeholders from our network.

For recruitment, we reached out to individuals within our established network, which includes educators, parents, reading specialists, librarians, legislators, community organization leaders, and other stakeholders invested in literacy education.

To facilitate meaningful dialogue, we organized two virtual conversations. These sessions were conducted in a facilitated format to maintain focus and productivity.

Our discussions centered around a series of guiding questions meant to gather detailed insights on the draft policy. These questions were created from our initial review of the policy and aimed to address important points. The questions included:

- What values should MSDE explicitly uphold in the final policy?
- What surprised you about the policy?
- What did the policy get right?
- What, if anything, is missing?
- Where do you see opportunities for refinement or clarification?

By focusing on these questions, we were able to collect thoughtful, specific, and thoughtful feedback.

This process underscores our commitment to enhancing literacy education in Maryland and the value of a range of perspectives from the individuals who will be asked to implement the policy and those it is intended to benefit.



## 2025 - 2026 MAJOR ACTIVITIES

### 2025 Highlights

In 2025, Maryland READS hosted and participated in a series of convenings and strategic discussions designed to advance adolescent literacy policy and practice statewide.

- **January 31:** Virtual Happy Hour with the Cecil County Superintendent
- **May 16:** Maryland READS Expert Advisory Delegation (MREAD) meeting with MSDE
- **May 30:** Virtual Happy Hour with MSDE
- **October 3:** Virtual Happy Hour with the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
- **December 8:** Breakout session at the Maryland READS statewide convening

### 2026 Highlights

In February 2026, Maryland READS brought together a cross-section of educators, community leaders, and stakeholders to engage in a roundtable discussion on the Draft Adolescent Literacy Policy.

#### Roundtable: Draft Adolescent Literacy Policy

##### Session 1: February 18, 2026

Participants appreciated the emphasis on shared literacy responsibility (e.g., “all teachers are literacy teachers”), and supported the use of assessment and screening as tools to identify needs and guide support.

Participants expressed the following concerns:

- **Feasibility & Teacher Preparation:** “All teachers are literacy teachers” and universal screening were supported in principle, but stakeholders questioned feasibility without clear Science of Reading training, coaching, and guidance on how teachers will interpret data and translate it into instruction.
- **Assessment & Intervention Specificity:** The draft provides some assessment detail, but does not adequately specify Tier 2/3 intervention pathways (including who is responsible, when interventions occur, and how progress is monitored).
- **Accountability & Enforcement:** Participants asked how districts, schools, and adults will be held accountable and how compliance will be enforced; they noted the policy requires clear monitoring and defined follow-through when expectations are not met.
- **K-12 scope, Equity, and Engagement:** Stakeholders identified a gap in high school literacy supports and called for clearer, more actionable guidance for grades 9–12. They also emphasized the need for greater attention to linguistic justice and writing, along with more relevant and engaging instruction through digital literacy and real-world reading and writing applications.

In general, attendees agreed that the policy would be strengthened by clearer implementation guidance, stronger accountability mechanisms, and more specific language to ensure consistent, equitable execution across districts.

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## Session 2: February 20, 2026

Participants viewed the universal screening provisions as a strength, especially the inclusion of specific dates and parent involvement.

Participants expressed the following concerns:

- **Coaching and Implementation:** Educators noted that sustained, high-quality coaching is necessary for all grades. A clear statewide coaching framework across K–12 is essential to ensure consistent implementation and measurable gains in student achievement.
- **Teacher Capacity and Tier Alignment:** All content teachers need literacy training and usable student data; without clearer Tier 1–3 alignment and guidance, expectations may increase the burden on school staff and teachers without meaningfully improving student outcomes.
- **Equity, access, and widening gaps:** Stakeholders warned the policy could widen gaps if implementation is uneven, especially given staffing and material shortages, and urged viable alternatives when districts lack capacity, including supports for vulnerable students.
- **Support for Diverse Learners and Writing:** Participants requested more comprehensive language addressing a broader range of disabilities and learning differences beyond dyslexia, as well as greater emphasis on writing, digital literacy, and life-skills literacy.

In general, attendees agreed that the policy needs clearer implementation pathways, stronger accountability, and more supports to deliver consistent, equitable impact statewide.

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## Proposed Values

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- **Shared Responsibility for Literacy:** All teachers, at every grade level and across content areas, share responsibility for teaching students to read and advancing their literacy development.
- **Capacity Building and Professional Learning:** Ensure educators and administrators, across elementary and secondary grades, receive the training and coaching needed to implement the policy effectively.
- **Equity and Access:** Prioritize supports for underserved students and those with diverse family backgrounds so that every student receives high-quality instruction and intervention.
- **Writing as Core Literacy:** Elevate writing as essential to literacy and life readiness, including practical writing skills (e.g., applications, resumes, workplace communication).
- **Data Transparency and Use:** Ensure educators, students, and families have actionable, accessible data to identify needs, guide instruction, and access supports effectively.
- **Collaboration and Partnership:** Strengthen collaboration across districts, grade levels, and community partners to build cohesive supports and fill resource gaps.
- **Urgency:** Treat literacy gaps as an immediate crisis requiring prompt action to prevent further widening.
- **Student-Centered Outcomes:** Commit to meeting students where they are and measuring success through real outcomes, not policy compliance.
- **Education and Advocacy:** Ensure students and families receive timely, accessible information and resources so that they understand their rights, available supports, and how to effectively advocate for needed services and accommodations.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are grateful to our interns Charlotte Sanford and Laura Ruskowski whose contributions were invaluable, as well as for the participation of our Board members, Lisa Blottenberger and Ellen O'Neill.

As noted above, Maryland READS has been engaged in a series of activities focused on adolescent literacy throughout 2025 that played a critical role in building our capacity and knowledge in this area. Our interns from last year, Megan Musselman and Zoe Macer, were critical team members in this work.