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Supporting Literacy Proficiency in Maine

Nearly half (48%) of Maine's students grades 3-12, do not meet Maine's literacy proficiency standards (Maine Assessment and Accountability Reporting System). This statistic does not include those with the most severe developmental disabilities; and special education students make up only 18% of the population qualified to participate, as well as English learners making up an additional 2.6% of those assessed – therefore the aforementioned populations do not adequately account for the underperformance. Furthermore, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Maine is the lowest performing state in New England in 4th grade reading assessments (and outpaces only Rhode Island for 8th grade). Due to the high importance of effective literacy skills, Maine's underperformance in educating students to meet literacy standards is, and should be, a top priority.

The Maine Department of Education defines literacy as “the ability to construct and convey meaning for a variety of purposes through an array of contextual forms and symbols, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.” Literacy plays one of the most crucial roles in determining both economic and social success for Mainer's. According to the Education Commission of the States:

Developmentally, the early elementary years are when children best acquire the academic and non-academic skills on which long-lasting educational success depends. A student's ability to meet grade-level expectations by the end of third grade plays a significant role in the likelihood of them graduating from high school.

In addition to utilizing literacy skills on a daily basis, research has shown that the ability to read and write effectively reduces poverty and unemployment, supports good health, and strongly contributes to a higher quality of life – conversely, illiteracy is projected to cost the U.S. \$362 billion a year in reduced business productivity (The Guardian). Moreover, literacy is the foundation on which we learn throughout our formal school years, because it serves as the foundation for becoming a lifelong learner.

The research question for the policy analysis is: How can public policy support schools and teachers in strengthening literacy proficiency rates for Maine's school-aged youth? Through interviews with literacy specialists and reviews of research on literacy and its promotion, it has become evident that there are three key issues contributing to Maine schools' underperformance in fostering literacy skills: insufficient resources and requirements in (1) assessment, (2) professional development, and (3) governance.

Assessment: State administered assessments in literacy, mathematics, and science are required in all Maine public schools. There are, however, significant flaws in the way the state assess and in the lack of requirements for assessment. First, there is a state requirement for schools to have a multi-tier support system in place for students, and a large component of this process is to identify through assessment which students need support. While assessment is necessary to identify students in need of more support from teachers,

there is no requirement or uniformity as to what schools use for such an assessment. Secondly, the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) does not assess students until they reach the 3rd grade. This is a problem because the most critical time period to learn literacy skills is K-3rd grade – according to interviews with literacy specialists and evidence from research literature. And when children do not learn to read while their brains are most able to do so – during early cognitive development – they end up with a literacy deficit that becomes difficult to address later in their academic careers (it should be stressed, however, that sound literacy instruction in grades 3-12 should also be a focus of policy). Furthermore, when students are assessed after the 3rd grade, teachers generally receive the results months after the assessment, which precludes teachers from adapting their instruction in time to help students focus on weaknesses. The MEA and MHSA (for high school assessment) are summative assessments, which are helpful to measure how Maine students are performing overall, but they are not as advantageous to teachers in identifying and understanding students' needs in literacy throughout the day-to-day lessons. For example, if a student is falling behind in literacy comprehension, a teacher may not be able to recognize the student's needs until they have already moved on to the next instructional unit, when it might be too late to address.

Solutions for Assessment: One form of assessment that has proven successful in identifying students who need support is the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. RTI uses assessment to identify students who need support in multiple academic areas, and it also offers strategies to implement support. In addition, it then reassesses students to determine if stronger supports are further needed. Some schools, however, may not be aware of its existence or its effectiveness, and schools therefore need to be made aware and encouraged to adopt RTI models/frameworks. A second additional solution is to require assessments of K-3 students statewide – because, as mentioned, this is a critical time period for learning literacy. And thirdly, effective implementation of formative assessment is an additional solution. Formative assessment, as opposed to summative assessment, is a less formal means of assessing students' comprehension on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis. It is between the teacher and the student and helps the teacher to see immediately how they need to adapt their literacy instruction. It also helps teachers work with students one on one to understand how the student is falling behind and what they can do to catch up – before it's too late and the rest of the class has moved on to the next lesson. There is not an exact program of formative assessment that can be adopted by schools, but one can be created by educational experts upon the state's request – and its use can be folded into professional development trainings for literacy teachers.

Professional Development: Professional development is a requirement for Maine teachers, but its implementation is up to the school districts. Consequently there is very little uniformity in what is required of teachers to learn about teaching. For example, an educator who teaches literacy skills might never take a professional development course on research-based methods of literacy instruction thereby not understanding how children learn best, how best to support them, and how their stages of cognitive development are correlated with literacy acquisition.

Solutions for Professional Development: It is crucial for teachers to be current on best literacy pedagogical practices, which is accomplished by receiving professional development throughout their career and especially at the beginning of their teaching career. Research-based literacy instruction practices should include understanding what students should know

at a specific age/ability level, how students best learn at their developmental stage, how to teach at each developmental age, how to assess what students comprehend, and how to identify and instruct literacy to students who need more support. Thus, it is recommended that these trainings be required, at least once, for all Maine public teachers instructing literacy, and preferably within their first year of teaching.

Governance: Oversight and accountability are essential to ensure schools are meeting state standards in literacy. However, insuring accountability for high quality instructional programming is challenging for the Maine DOE or the Maine State Board of Education (MSBE) in a state in which curriculum is determined by local school systems. While school districts should have a certain level of autonomy, there also needs to be accountability and oversight to ensure that schools are utilizing best practices and meeting state standards. For example, with literacy promotion, the local district decides how to implement effective literacy supports and instruction; but when it fails to meet state standards, there is insufficient oversight to ensure the district adjusts its practices and policies to then reattempt to meet the state standards. Similarly, the local school district may not be engaging in effective oversight over the school principal, and the principal may not engage in effective oversight over the school teacher who instructs on literacy. While some school districts may have better accountability than others, there is no state standard.

Solutions for Governance: More collaboration is needed between the MDOE/MSBE and school districts, and school districts need to be accountable to the MDOE and MSBE when their schools are not meeting state standards. The MDOE and MSBE needs to be able to assist the districts in keeping current on the best practices in research-based literacy pedagogy, and have the ability to ensure that the districts are enacting these practices. There also needs to be mandated oversight between the districts and the school principals and between the principals and the teachers – this can be accomplished through classroom observations to ensure that teachers are properly implementing best practices in literacy instruction, as well as monitoring the results of the students' performance. And it also must include taking steps to address short comings when teachers are not adhering to these best practices (i.e., through additional training).

Conclusion: To accomplish these aforementioned solutions, policy makers should look to the recommendations laid out in Maine's comprehensive state literacy plan "Literacy for ME," and work with the State Literacy Team to develop formative assessments and research based professional development courses that aim to foster literacy – particularly in grades K-3, but beyond that as well. Following the development of assessment and professional development courses, their implementation needs to be required across the state by all teachers of literacy. Moreover, while RTI approaches have been adopted by many schools in Maine, adoption by all public schools in Maine should be encouraged, as it has been proven to be effective. Policy needs to be created that offers teachers the knowledge and resources to instruct literacy, allows them freedom to do so, and lastly, offers oversight and keeps the schools and teachers accountable for the success of their students' literacy acquisition.