Principles and Recommendations

On the following pages we present five key Organizing and Design Principles to guide districts in creating an early literacy assessment system (ELAS) that supports literacy learning. Each Principle includes a brief description of the major ideas that give rise to and necessitate adherence to that Principle in the design and implementation of the ELAS. Recognizing that building a high-quality system of assessments takes time and requires fiscal as well as human resources, we have clustered the five Principles in three Implementation Phases. Each Implementation Phase concludes with **Recommendations** for action.

PHASE I — Planning for and Designing an Early Literacy Assessment System (ELAS)

Principle #1: The ELAS must be designed to ALIGN AND INTEGRATE WITH ALL SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL SYSTEMS; this includes the systems of curriculum, instruction, professional learning, as well as the overall assessment system.

Principle #2: The ELAS must reflect ASSESSMENT SYSTEM DESIGN FEATURES that make it coherent, comprehensive, and continuous across time and contexts of use.

PHASE II — Implementing an Early Literacy Assessment System (ELAS)

Principle #3: The ELAS must reflect what we know from theory, research, and practice about LITERACY DEVELOPMENT.

Principle #4: The ELAS must reflect what we know about the PURPOSES, USERS, AND TECHNICAL ADEQUACY OF EARLY LITERACY ASSESSMENT.

PHASE III — Supporting and Monitoring an Early Literacy Assessment System (ELAS)

Principle #5: The ELAS must be supported and monitored by a sustained program of collaborative, inquiry-based PROFESSIONAL LEARNING and FEEDBACK.

"Everyone concerned with the early literacy development of Michigan's children needs to understand the goals and purposes of the various assessments included within the system and how to use the information derived from those assessments properly and productively in their ongoing activities to support the development of literacy for all children."

PHASE I: Planning for and Designing an Early Literacy Assessment System (ELAS)

Principle #1:
The ELAS must be designed to ALIGN AND INTEGRATE WITH ALL SCHOOL- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL SYSTEMS; this includes the systems of curriculum, instruction, and professional learning as well as the overall assessment system.

District- and school-based settings are complex ecologies that call for necessary conditions and structures that can support coherence among curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems. Establishing such coherence at the "local" level of classrooms within a school and schools within districts requires that a district have in place policies, procedures, and practices that enable the acquisition and use of an appropriate set of resources. Coherence also calls for professional learning programs and accountability practices that enable, rather than undermine, what is supposed to happen at the school and classroom levels.

The **Portraits** in **Section II** show how assessments must be aligned with each other at a conceptual and operational level. In other words, each assessment tool or practice used must focus on a clear purpose—with an intentional use for assessment results—that aligns with curriculum and instruction if it is to support the development of literacy.

Section III-1 of this Guide—**Necessary Conditions and Structures: District characteristics that support coherent implementation of an Early Literacy Assessment System**—describes and elaborates on this Principle in greater detail. It describes the state- and district-level features necessary to support development and implementation of coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional learning in support of early literacy development. We discuss how this work of aligning literacy assessments and building a multi-tiered ELAS is complex, to say the least. It is suggested that a significant amount of energy be placed on the alignment and integration of the ELAS. The amount of time the leaders devote to instructional responsibilities varies due to context within and across a district. However, the Wallace Foundation (n.d.) has invested in a project known as the SAM (school administration managers) process, highly recommending that principals, for example, spend 50% or more of their time related to instructional work, including assessment that informs teaching and learning.

In addition to an intentional allocation of human resources, this work needs to be distributed across many educators in the district and its respective schools through an established ELAS Leadership Team. This team oversees the practices and protocols of the organization to drive the work of developing an ELAS, from planning and designing to implementation and monitoring, ultimately creating conducive classroom conditions where assessment influences curriculum, instruction, and professional learning in literacy.

An ELAS is a necessary literacy investment that needs to be deliberately integrated with other district and school efforts. The ELAS Leadership Team can lead this effort by explicitly connecting it to the work for all educators in the organization. Far too

often, we suffer from *initiative fatigue* in our institutions (see e.g., Reeves, 2017; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egIcM6LRnwU). Fragmentation leads to a lack of focus and decreases efficacy and impact of the effort, leading to initiative fatigue. A carefully woven, focused approach by the ELAS Leadership Team can mitigate this common phenomenon.

To support the work of the ELAS Leadership Team, Sections III-1 and III-2 elaborate on Recommendations related to developing a logic model and theory of action to guide the process of decision making when aligning literacy assessments across schools and the district. This ensures coordination of the early literacy assessment system with other district and state tasks, leading to an equitable allocation of support in addition to high-quality classroom instruction. The ELAS Leadership Team also ensures that educators engage families in authentic, meaningful ways as part of the process of assessment.

Principle #2:
The ELAS must reflect ASSESSMENT SYSTEM DESIGN FEATURES that make it coherent, comprehensive, and continuous across time and contexts of use.

The elements of any assessment system must fit together rather than reflect disconnected pieces that don't cohere and complement each other. Therefore, the ELAS must be designed with explicit attention to important system design features if it is to function as a "system." Attention must be paid to selecting assessments that work together across contexts and purposes in ways that create **coherence, comprehensiveness,** and **continuity**. Only when designed with these features in mind will the ELAS function as a system and fulfill the intended goal of supporting early literacy development.

The **Portraits** in **Section II** illustrate the multiple aspects of literacy development that educators are interested in assessing. They provide some examples of how assessment practices and tools might reflect a rich, interconnected model of literacy development and how they can fit together across time and contexts of use in ways that are consistent with the three important system design features: **coherence, comprehensiveness,** and **continuity**.

Section III-2 of this Guide—**Assessment System Architecture: Design features needed in the structure and operation of an early literacy assessment system**—describes and elaborates on this Principle in greater detail. It briefly describes how assessment is fundamentally a process of reasoning from evidence about what students know and can do for some facet of literacy. To make this point, we use the assessment triangle from *Knowing What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment* (Pellegrino, Chudowsky & Glaser, 2001) to describe the reasoning process and show how the three elements of that triangle—cognition, observation, and interpretation—must fit together.

Central to this entire reasoning process are theories, models, and data on how students learn and what students know as they develop competence for important aspects of a domain such as literacy. Starting with a model of development and learning is critical since it indicates the most important aspects of student development and learning about which one would want to draw inferences, and it provides clues about the types of assessment tasks that will elicit evidence to support those inferences for whatever goal one has in mind with respect to using that information.

Any valid and useful literacy assessment must therefore involve a process of reasoning from evidence about one or more key aspects of the development of reading, writing, speaking or listening. A system of literacy assessment necessarily involves multiple such assessments and includes use of the formative assessment practices. Multiple assessments would focus on key elements of the development of early literacy and would be used by various individuals to make judgments about student progress. Key ideas related to the nature of these assessments with respect to theory and data on literacy development, along with ideas about the uses and users of these assessments, are discussed in **Sections III-3** and **III-4**.

Section III-2 focuses on the broader criteria that need to be used in the process of selection and assembly of the set of early literacy assessments for them to function together, i.e., the ways they need to relate to each other to serve as a balanced "assessment system." As noted earlier, assessment systems are balanced when the various assessments in the system:

a) are coherently linked through a clear specification of the learning targets,
b) comprehensively provide multiple sources of evidence to support educational decision making, and
c) continuously document student progress over time (Pellegrino et al., 2001).

These features—coherence, comprehensiveness, and continuity—create a powerful image of a high-quality system of assessments, rooted in a common model of literacy development and learning.

Each of these three key architectural features is then described as well as important ideas related to the balancing of systems within systems. The conception of systems within systems is noted explicitly in **Principle #1** and discussed in **Section III-1**. As discussed above, the ELAS must be in balance with other school-, district-, and state-level systems related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional learning, and accountability. Within the assessment system there will be sub-systems that operate at different levels and serve different purposes. For example, there would be assessments designed for different purposes (see **Section III-4**) that operate at the classroom and/or district levels, as well as across levels of the Pre-K through 12 system.

Because there can be considerable complexity associated with planning for and designing an ELAS given the purposes it is intended to serve and the levels at which it is intended to operate, we describe the importance of a theory of action

in system design. To help develop and articulate a theory of action for an ELAS, it is recommended that the district's ELAS Leadership Team lay out a logic model for the assessment system. A logic model compels the ELAS Leadership Team to specify the presumed theory of action. It helps to make explicit assumptions about how particular components are supposed to work, who is to be impacted, and what the expected consequences should be and why. The logic model enables monitoring the building of the ELAS and its enactment. It also enables strategies for evaluation of the ELAS along the way and for adjustment and correction as needed. Development of a theory of action for the ELAS and a logic model for the system components and design is a challenging task that takes time; to support this process, we point to various resources available to help guide district ELAS Leadership Teams and others.

Phase I Planning & Design RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1: DISTRICT LEADERS should form an **ELAS Leadership Team** charged with guiding the Planning and Design, Implementation, and Supporting and Monitoring Phases of the ELAS.

The **ELAS LEADERSHIP TEAM** should:

1.2: Establish compatibility and coordination of the ELAS with other district- and state-level systems of curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional learning, and accountability.

1.3: Plan thoughtful strategies for engaging with families and the community as key participants in the ELAS process, both as contributors to and recipients of assessment data.

1.4: Develop and adopt a logic model and theory of action for the structure, functioning, and evaluation of the proposed ELAS.

1.5: Identify the educational decisions to be made, assessment information needed to support those decisions, and the stakeholder(s) who will be making the decision(s).

1.6: Construct a framework for the ELAS that includes clearly articulated relationships among the assessment tools and practices relative to a model of competency development in reading, writing, speaking, or listening.

1.7: Use the framework to conduct an audit of all existing district- and school-level assessment tools and practices currently in use to determine whether they meet criteria for inclusion and should remain part of the system.

ELAS Practice Tip

Who should be part of a district's ELAS Leadership Team?

Each district's team will look different, depending on the capacity and knowledge team members bring to the work.

The ELAS Leadership Team should include representation from as many as possible of the following role groups (Note: In smaller districts, it is likely that one person will carry multiple responsibilities represented here):

- superintendent/designee
- literacy specialist
- curriculum coordinator
- district assessment coordinator
- professional development leader
- early childhood specialist
- special education coordinator
- building level administrator(s)
- early childhood and K-3 teachers

Note: The work of implementing and supporting an ELAS will be helped by having an individual tasked with selecting assessments and planning a program of professional learning to support the ELAS. This professional will require resources and sufficient time to devote to continuing education specifically in the area(s) of literacy instruction and assessment.

Notes

PHASE II: Implementing an Early Literacy Assessment System (ELAS)

Principle #3:
The ELAS must reflect what we know from theory, research, and practice about LITERACY DEVELOPMENT.

Early literacy development is complex, yet understandable, given all we know from research and practice. The paths that students take to literacy involve the development of a number of competencies that are interconnected and developed across multiple contexts that include the home, the community, and the school. The competencies reflect the richness and complexity of language in both its written and spoken forms. They also reflect what we expect students to know and be able to do as they progress through learning to read, write, and speak and using the receptive and productive features of language to learn about their world—including the knowledge in each discipline (English language arts (ELA), mathematics, social studies, science, arts, etc.) deemed appropriate for success in life and society.

The **Portraits** in **Section II** provide a glimpse of three students' journeys along this path, with examples of the variation in student development that are often observed, and the ways in which home, community, and school can support each student's journey towards attainment of the literacy goals we have for students in the early primary grades and beyond.

Section III-3 of this Guide—**Literacy Development and Learning: Features of an early literacy assessment system that reflect what we know about literacy development**—describes and elaborates on this Principle in greater detail. It provides an exposition of the multiple features of a developmentally appropriate ELAS, based on what we know about the learning and development of literacy from research, theory, and practice, and grounded in contemporary definitions of literacy. For example, *Michigan's Action Plan for Literacy Excellence* defines literacy as *"the ability to read, view, listen, write, speak, and visually represent to comprehend and to communicate meaning in various settings through oral, written, visual, and digital forms of expression"* (MDE, 2017, p.8). The Educational Testing Service offers an expanded definition of literacy, including: *"the deployment of a constellation of cognitive, language, and social reasoning skills, knowledge, strategies, and dispositions, directed towards achieving specific purposes"* (Sabatini et al., 2013, p. 7). Together, these definitions embrace the broad range of processes and factors (e.g., prior knowledge, self-regulation, reading strategies motivation, engagement) that influence literacy learning and development.

DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY

"the ability to read, view, listen, write, speak, and visually represent to comprehend and to communicate meaning in various settings through oral, written, visual, and digital forms of expression"

— MDE, 2017, p.8

"the deployment of a constellation of cognitive, language, and social reasoning skills, knowledge, strategies, and dispositions, directed towards achieving specific purposes"

— Sabatini et al., 2013, p.7

Aligned with these definitions of literacy, we identify and explain features of an early literacy assessment system that reflect what we know about literacy development. We propose an early literacy assessment system that:

- is developmentally sensitive
- identifies whether students are receiving excellent early instruction
- identifies students who may have risk factors so that they receive effective literacy intervention programs as early as possible
- yields information that is useful to guiding teacher decision making so that literacy instruction can be tailored to the various profiles of strength, challenge, and interests that students present
- is informed by the range of processes and factors that explain literacy achievement
- takes into consideration the complexities of reading comprehension and reflects the dynamic and developmental nature of comprehension
- provides information on students' interests so that educators can use this information in planning instruction, and takes students' interests into account when reporting assessment results
- applies an asset orientation motivated by the question, "What knowledge and skill is the learner bringing to the table?"

Also in **Section III-3**, we explicate the proposed features of an early literacy assessment system by:

a) describing research, theory, and practice that support each feature,

b) identifying ways in which the features are illustrated within the **Portraits** in **Section II,** and

c) identifying tools that can be adopted or adapted for the purpose of helping practitioners to evaluate an existing literacy assessment system and to design a literacy assessment system that reflects the features.

Principle #4:
The ELAS must reflect what we know about the PURPOSES, USERS, AND TECHNICAL ADEQUACY OF EARLY LITERACY ASSESSMENT.

A variety of assessments are administered to students in schools, all with the same goal: to move student learning forward. The purposes of these assessments range from school reform efforts to identifying students who need supplemental instruction to discovering students' current understanding in the classroom. As such, assessment data is often at the center of many conversations in schools. However, these conversations can easily go awry when the roles and proposed decisions of various users or the technical adequacy of the data to support those decisions are unclear or there is a lack of shared understanding.

The **Portraits** in **Section II** provide examples of assessments reflecting multiple components of literacy development, including word knowledge and decoding, comprehension, production of spoken and written language and discourse, and others. They also illustrate how the users of those assessments can vary, as can the purposes for which they use specific literacy related assessments.

Section III-4 of this Guide—**Purposes, Users, and Desirable Properties of Assessments: Features of early literacy assessments that reflect what we know**—describes and elaborates on this Principle in greater detail. It discusses how prior to collecting assessment results, educators who use those results need a shared understanding of who uses them, what they use them for, the evidence that supports the desired decision, and what the results indicate. It details ways to clarify each of these four considerations.

1. First, we describe several typical users of assessment data and their roles in using that data to move student learning forward.
2. We then provide a list of specific questions that different assessment data can and cannot address and the decisions that can be made with the assessment data. We highlight the importance of understanding that assessment data should be used only as intended, since different types of scores reported from a single commercial assessment are designed and validated to address specific questions.
3. Next, we present the concept of technical adequacy (reliability, validity, and fairness). We draw upon research to specify the technical adequacy criteria needed to evaluate the quality and appropriate use of data. Responsible use of assessment data requires that users know the evidence that either supports or does not support the decisions made based on the results. Higher stakes decisions require higher levels of evidence (i.e., technical adequacy). Even lower stakes decisions require sufficient levels of technical adequacy.
4. Finally, responsible use of data requires that assessment users can describe the aspects of literacy that an assessment does and does not measure. Understanding the aspects of literacy an assessment reflects and how that fits with other aspects of literacy in a developmental continuum is necessary to prevent common assessment-related mistakes like teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, and misdiagnosing the root of literacy difficulties.

Section III-4 provides a crosswalk of the users of assessment data with the specific decisions they make, and it addresses the properties of technical adequacy needed for those decisions. We also illustrate this connection with specific examples of commonly used literacy assessments in schools and point to additional resources helpful in identifying quality assessment tools and information.

Because the formative assessment process, frequently referred to as *assessment for learning*, is so critical in supporting the development of literacy, we include two sets of resources related to that process. The first is a formative assessment planning template and the second is an illustration of the application of the formative assessment process to a segment from the **Portraits** in **Section II**.

Phase II Implementation RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1: The **ELAS LEADERSHIP TEAM** should use the logic model and theory of action (called for in Phase I) to guide the selection and implementation of assessment *tools and resources for inclusion in the system.*

To accomplish Recommendation 2.1, the **ELAS LEADERSHIP TEAM**, in collaboration with **PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS**, should:

2.2: Select individual assessment resources on the basis of evidence of their capacity to provide construct-relevant and instructionally valuable information about a student's literacy development and growth in a given literacy domain—reading, writing, speaking, or listening.

2.3: Select individual assessment resources on the basis of evidence that they are developmentally appropriate and respectful with regard to the cognitive, social, emotional, cultural, and performance demands they place on children.

2.4: Select individual assessment resources on the basis of evidence of appropriate levels of technical quality with respect to validity, reliability, and fairness given the intended interpretive use(s) and the potential consequences for students:

2.5: Provide technical assistance and guidance to the system's various assessment users to help ensure that they can select assessments that best meet their information needs and then use the results from those assessments in appropriate and technically defensible ways.

PHASE III: Supporting and Monitoring an Early Literacy Assessment System

Principle #5:
The ELAS must be supported and monitored by a sustained program of collaborative, inquiry-based PROFESSIONAL LEARNING and FEEDBACK.

Educators at all levels of the educational system need to be assessment literate and possess disciplinary knowledge about literacy (reading, writing, oral language) to use assessment information effectively to support all learners. Particular emphasis needs to be given to assessment literacy focused on understanding and implementing effective classroom formative assessment practices for early literacy. To accomplish this, all educators need to engage in a sustained program of collaborative, inquiry-based professional learning.

Moreover, students and the broad range of adults who support them (families, community members, and local policymakers) can benefit from having knowledge, dispositions, and skills that help them become stronger supporters of and decision-makers for quality assessment systems and informed users of assessment data. Schools should embrace opportunities to develop assessment literacy among students and the adults who support them.

The **Portraits** in **Section II** show that curriculum, instruction, and assessment must function interdependently as a coherent system. A coherent system is enabled and mediated by the continuous learning and improvement of educational professionals in schools and districts.

Section III-5 of this Guide—**Professional Learning Programs: Features that support stakeholder groups in implementing and using an ELAS**—describes and elaborates on this Principle in greater detail. It focuses on collaborative inquiry, which is a recursive and systematic process involving six phases through which educators explore issues about their practice and their students' literacy learning. It provides educators with the necessary structure and processes to explore their wonderings to determine evidence-based resolutions through dialogue, data analysis, new learning, experimentation, coaching, feedback and reflection. Collaborative inquiry is also an essential strategy for advancing equity; those engaged in inquiry not only deepen their content knowledge and pedagogy but also increase their understanding of student culture, language, and background and their impact on assessment. They also learn how to use assessment information to guide their future actions.

Section III-5 also describes the purposes of each of the six phases of the collaborative inquiry cycle and illustrates through example how each phase aligns with assessment literacies that educators need to effectively use assessment and create assessment systems that support literacy practices. The value of engaging educators in continuous cycles of collaborative inquiry rests on six assumptions drawn from methodologically strong studies of the basic principles for designing professional learning that influences educator practice and student performance (Desimone, 2009).

School and district leaders and policymakers should consider these **six driving assumptions** when designing their professional learning:

1. Professional learning is an active process.
2. Professional learning allows for educator agency.
3. Professional learning is relevant and content-specific.
4. Professional learning is situated in cultures of collaboration.
5. Professional learning is sustained.
6. Professional learning requires organizational systems and structures of support.

We also argue that collaborative, inquiry-based professional learning will only accomplish its goals if educators are provided with adequate time to meet with colleagues; with experienced facilitators to guide educators in the collaborative inquiry process; and with coaches, teacher leaders, and school and district leaders to support the implementation of educators' new learning into practice. Time and opportunity must also be made to engage in two-way information sharing and construction of knowledge with students and their families.

Section III-5 also emphasizes the need to monitor and evaluate the quality, utility and effectiveness of the professional learning program. When investing time, effort, and resources in the implementation of any such program of professional learning and system support, it is important to clearly articulate a formative evaluation plan that includes ongoing monitoring and feedback from the field about efficacy and effectiveness.

Phase III Support and Monitoring RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1: The **ELAS LEADERSHIP TEAM** should use the logic model and theory of action to develop plans for professional learning and formative evaluation of the ELAS.

To accomplish Recommendation 3.1, the **ELAS LEADERSHIP TEAM,** in collaboration with **PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS,** should:

3.2: Gather information about the current level of knowledge and capacity related to literacy, assessment, and professional learning (strengths and gaps) among staff (teachers, administrators, coaches), students and their families, and local policymakers, and use these data to guide the implementation and support of an ELAS.

3.3: Create a cohesive master professional learning plan (aligned to the Michigan's *Professional Learning Policy* and associated *Standards for Professional Learning*) to support all stakeholders responsible for early literacy development and assessment. The plan should address early literacy development and assessment and meet the learning needs of children and instructional needs of teachers based on evidence of need as well as research.

3.4: Budget for and plan to provide substantive resources and support for content-focused professional learning about early literacy development and assessment that is collaborative, intensive, sustained, and job-embedded.

3.5: Participate in statewide efforts to prepare, support, and generate teacher leaders and instructional coaches to promote effective early literacy development and assessment practices, with an emphasis on the use of classroom formative assessment practices.

3.6: Develop a plan for formative evaluation of the ELAS that includes ongoing monitoring and feedback from the field about the quality, utility, and effectiveness of the assessment system as it is implemented and becomes operational.