Section III-1

NECESSARY CONDITIONS AND STRUCTURES: District characteristics that support coherent implementation of an early literacy assessment system

*This chapter describes the state- and district-level features that need to be in place in order to support an early literacy assessment system (ELAS) that fits within a coherent system of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional learning in support of early literacy development. The content provides some relevant explanation and backing for **Principle #1** and associated **Phase I Planning and Design Recommendations.***

Phase I RECOMMENDATIONS (Principle #1)

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.

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.

Introduction

District and school 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 is critical. This requires that a district have in place policies, procedures, and practices that enable the acquisition and use of an appropriate set of resources together with professional development programs that enable what is supposed to happen at the school and classroom level.

This section will begin to consider traits of high-performing school districts, in general, and then describe the specific implications and recommendations for school-level systems and the necessary conditions and structures that support coherent curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems.

Coherence is crucial

We can define coherence as a process that involves schools and district central offices working together to craft or continually negotiate the fit between external demands and schools' own goals and strategies (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Crafting coherence involves schools setting school-wide goals and strategies that have particular features, using those goals and strategies to decide whether to bridge themselves to or buffer themselves from external demands. Coherence also depends upon district central offices supporting these school-level processes.

Pellegrino et al., (2001), in an effort to prompt new thinking about instruction, curriculum, and assessment design, situates this idea about coherence within a balanced assessment system where different assessments serve different purposes and different users. The authors explain that this balanced design can ensure features of coherence, comprehensiveness, and continuity. A system of assessment can provide a variety of evidence to support educational decision making and thus is considered to be comprehensive. The evidence and data across a system would connect back to student learning and growth over time, providing coherence and continuity. To build an ELAS without noting the above conditions and considerations will lead to critical missteps in future efforts.

Start with leadership and a theory of action

The creation and maintenance of an early literacy assessment system (ELAS), a part of a broader pre-K through secondary assessment system, will be more effective if the charge is taken up by the district's administrators and policymakers. Districts *"are uniquely positioned to ensure equity and to increase the capacity of all schools—not just some"* (Childress, Etter, Platas, Wheeler, & Campbell, 2007, p. 1). Looking at districts as the unit of analysis helps us frame the organizational conditions that need to be in place to foster a coherent, comprehensive, and continuous set of processes. We acknowledge that as organizations grow in size, they also grow in complexity.

A system of assessment must align with and be integrated with other systems that operate at school and district levels including curriculum, instruction, professional development, and accountability. As a result, an ELAS must be monitored by a district or school leadership team to ensure that it is aligned horizontally within grade levels and vertically across grade levels throughout a district. The leadership team also ensures that the ELAS provides data to inform instructional and curricular decisions.

One function of the ELAS Leadership Team is to articulate the district's ELAS theory of action. Developing and adopting a theory of action for the structure and functioning of the proposed ELAS can be a powerful practice. A theory of action consists of five components:

1. Problem identification
2. The goals to be achieved
3. An understanding of root cause
4. An understanding of the change process
5. An understanding of the organizational context (Mintrop, 2016).

Theories of action are a worthy vehicle for generating, testing, and confirming actionable knowledge. Additional information about the importance of a theory of action and the development of a logic model to clarify that theory and design a system of assessment is provided in Section III-2.

It is critical to have a process in place that uses data to inform decisions by the stakeholders. Creating structures of data collection and analysis at regular intervals throughout the year to adjust literacy instruction and intervention across the school and district is highly recommended. Teams can commit to and use a problem-solving approach with a set of questions to drive data dialogues.

Characteristics of high-performing districts and schools

Researchers Leithwood and Azah (2016) identify common characteristics of high-performing school districts, most of which support our Phase I Recommendations and the suggestions described in this section. In the districts they studied that had a positive impact on student outcomes, there was a commitment to the deliberate and consistent use of multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions, including decisions to maintain a coherent instructional program. Leadership was shared across the organization and not defined by title or role. Professional learning was driven by an authentic, job-embedded, relevant approach. Additionally, these districts had productive relationships with families. This research suggests that it is the district that guides individual schools in creating systems conducive to an effective ELAS.

Schools reflect their district and function as formal organizations themselves. The research of Bryk and colleagues (2010) unpacks the school improvement efforts within the Chicago Public Schools and posits that district or school leadership is the driver for change. More specifically, it is the principal who is the catalyst for school-level improvement efforts and initiatives, but the principal also nurtures the leadership of others to sustain a coherent program of school-wide development. These efforts include encouraging new relationships with parents and families, enhancing professional capacities of staff, and cultivating supports concerning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It is coherence in programming and effort that is key to consider.

Literacy Essentials provide guidance

Michigan educators are fortunate to have the Essential School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices in Literacy (MAISA/GELN/ELTF, 2016) to guide implications and recommendations for the field. The Essentials are grounded in research and informed by practitioners from across Michigan. Concepts described in the Essentials are cited below, drawn from a select subset of the School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices relevant to Principle #1. Although all ten School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices should occur in schools and be supported by districts, we know they will have greater impact when the effort is distributed across a group. We therefore suggest beginning the ELAS planning and development with Recommendation 1.1 of this Guide—the establishment of an ELAS Leadership Team—and focusing specifically on the *Essential School-Wide Center-Wide Practices* (MAISA/GELN/ELTF, 2016) that influence assessment. Because this is systems-level work throughout an organization, we acknowledge the extended amount of time it will take to implement the Recommendations and suggested practices.

"The leadership team is composed of instructional leaders committed to continuous improvements in literacy and ongoing attention to data."

School-Wide and Center-Wide Practice in Literacy 1

This Practice in Literacy calls for the implementation of evidence-based, high-quality literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment aligned across the learning environment (Slavin, Cheung, Holmes, Madden, & Chamberlain, 2013). Additionally, the ELAS Leadership Team must maintain a comprehensive system for assessing children's strengths and needs and using that information to inform children's education (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). This not only includes a set of assessment tools and practices, but also includes processes to gather and analyze the data and evidence (see Tools/Resources for Phase II). The **Portraits** in Section II of this Guide illustrate a system in which assessments are aligned with each other at a conceptual level in terms of the focus of each assessment and the ways in which information derived from assessments must align with curriculum and instruction if it is to support the development of literacy.

The **Portraits** reference a series of meetings, or "data days," that prompt teachers to review data binders to inform decisions about instruction and intervention. The use of the data binders and the scheduled meetings are coordinated by the leadership team and are practices that occur throughout the school and district. Additionally, each school leadership team reviews the previous year's data using the transition forms mentioned and plans instructional supports accordingly for the upcoming year.

Additionally, a school district must use evidence from the ELAS to develop the professional learning (PL) plan to meet the learning needs of children and instructional needs of teachers. Creating a district and school PL plan that is cohesive and based on evidence of need as well as research of effective literacy instruction will support the ongoing growth of teachers' abilities to implement an ELAS effectively.

"Ongoing professional learning opportunities reflect research on adult learning and effective literacy instruction."

School-Wide and Center-Wide Practice in Literacy 4

This Practice in Literacy states that ongoing professional learning (PL) opportunities should reflect research in adult learning and effective literacy instruction. Professional learning should be data-informed to meet the needs and best interests of teaching staff and their students (Hayes & Robnolt, 2006) as well as driven by a belief that teacher expertise is a strong predictor of child success (Podhajski, Mather, Nathan, & Sammons, 2009). Successful professional learning requires districts to invest in the development of expertise of all staff through collaborative learning designs such as study groups, collaborative inquiry, and problem solving (Cunningham, Etter, Platas, Wheeler, & Campbell, 2014). The professional learning should be focused on research-based instructional practices that are developmentally, culturally, and age-appropriate and support children's literacy development. Using resources such as the Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Prekindergarten and Essential Instructional Practices In Literacy: Grades K to 3 (MAISA/GELN/ELTF, 2016) will deepen teachers' understanding of knowledge and skills to be learned (Lane, Prokop, Johnson, Podhajski, & Nathan, 2013). Section III-5 expounds upon this recommendation further.

Professional learning for the teachers and staff is foundational in the **Portraits.** The district has established common collaborative planning time where some of the time is spent using a data dialogue protocol. Teachers and staff use evidence of students' strengths and needs noted in the data binders to inform their planning of whole-group, small-group, and individual lessons.

School-Wide and Center-Wide Practice in Literacy 5

This Practice in Literacy indicates that a district must develop a system of literacy support that includes, but also extends beyond, the instruction provided in the classroom. This system should include an equitable distribution of resources using evidence from an ELAS. Therefore, at the district and school level, there needs to be a process for determining the allocation of literacy support in addition to high-quality classroom instruction with multiple layers of support available to children who are not reading and/or writing at a proficient level. The instruction and additional supports are layered across learning environments, including the home; they are coherent and consistent with instruction received elsewhere in the school day and occur in addition to, not instead of, regular literacy instruction (Torgesen et al., 2001). This additional instruction is also differentiated to the individual child's specific profile of literacy strengths and needs (Gersten et al., 2008).

To make data-informed decisions, teachers are supported in using and reflecting on analyses of multiple, systematic internal assessments (e.g., universal screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring tools), formative assessment information collected and acted on during instruction, and observation as appropriate on an on-going basis. This practice will help to identify individual child needs early and accurately; tailor whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one instruction; and measure progress regularly (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). An example of this is providing intensive, systematic instruction on foundational reading skills in small groups to students who score below the benchmark score on word reading.

The **Portraits** in this Guide illustrate numerous examples of a system of support for students. During meetings to explore the data binders, students' strengths and areas of concern are discussed. Needs-based reading groups are determined, and district guidelines for Tier 2 referral are followed. Extensions for learning are represented as well. When needed, teachers gather more systematic information to add to their observations.

"There is a system for determining the allocation of literacy support in addition to high-quality classroom instruction with multiple layers of support available to children who are not reading and/or writing at a proficient level."

School-Wide and Center-Wide Practice in Literacy 8

This Practice in Literacy encourages schools and districts to see families as valuable partners who can contribute a wealth of knowledge about individual students' assets as well as needs. These funds of knowledge will help teachers tailor instruction to capitalize on the interests and prior knowledge of students. A consistent family engagement strategy pays specific attention to literacy development. To inform instruction, school and district staff should engage with families to prioritize *learning about them and their language and literacy practices, and draw from families' daily routines to build on culturally developed knowledge and skills accumulated in the home (e.g., inviting families to share texts they read and write as part of their lives at home or at work)* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Learning communities comprising parents and teachers could provide regular opportunities for families to build a network of social relationships to support language and literacy development. One example would be connecting families with community organizations that provide access to books or other educational

"A consistent family engagement strategy includes specific attention to literacy development."

supports (Ren & Hu, 2013). Teachers and specialists can work collaboratively to plan various levels of instructional supports, assess the efficacy of those supports, and adjust accordingly and foster familial and community participation in the education of children and the work of the learning environment (Warren, 2005).

Engagement with families plays a significant role in the early literacy assessment system illustrated in the **Portraits.** From the very beginning of the students' educational journey, the teachers are drawing information from their intentional interactions with families and archiving what they gather in the data binders. Coordinated picnics, home visits, phone calls, and regular family-teacher conferences, provide teachers opportunities to understand what the children know, enjoy, and can do. There is a deliberate focus on areas of interest, family activities, and children's progress.

Tools/Resources for PHASE I, Principle #1

Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades (What Works Clearinghouse, 2009)

This guide offers five specific recommendations to help educators identify struggling readers and implement evidence-based strategies to promote their reading achievement.

> Available at https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/3)

Design principles for new systems of assessment (Phi Delta Kappan, 2017)

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) grants states new flexibility to create more balanced assessment systems with a greater role for formative assessment. Drawing on lessons learned over three decades of research and reform, the authors of this article argue for state and local leaders to take the lead in designing new assessments guided by two core principles: 1) make assessments coherent with rich curriculum and instruction; 2) ground this integration of curriculum, instruction, and embedded assessments in equity-focused research on learning.

> Available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0031721717696478 (minimal fee required for non-PDK members).

District Assessment System Design (DASD) Toolkit (Center for Assessment, 2018)

This toolkit is useful for districts to determine users of assessment, the different ways that assessment information can be used, and which assessment approaches are most valuable in meeting the assessment information needs of different assessment users in the district.

> Available at www.nciea.org/featured-resources.

Dual-Capacity Framework (DualCapacity.org)

Based on existing research and best practices, the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2) is designed to support the development of family engagement strategies, policies, and programs. The Framework should be seen as a compass, laying out the goals and conditions necessary to chart a path toward effective family engagement efforts that are linked to student achievement and school improvement.

Available at www.dualcapacity.org.

Michigan's Student Individual Reading Instruction Plan (IRIP) Companion Document (MEMSPA, 2017)

This 22-page document for school leaders and leadership teams is to support the use of Michigan's IRIP form. It provides general guidance, research, and best practices to school districts. The document is student focused, and its authors aim to support teachers' and teams' abilities to be data-informed as they undertake the process of creating, completing, monitoring, and supporting the implementation of an IRIP.

Available from the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association (memspa.org) or at the ELAS Tools and Resources link below.

A listing of all Tools and Resources mentioned in this Guide to help you develop an early literacy assessment system (ELAS) is available online at **www.MichiganAssessmentConsortium.org/ELAS.**

Notes