

# Early Literacy: Fall Update

December 1, 2020

## Background

In the 2018-19 school year, the Des Moines Public Schools Board of Directors engaged parents, community members/partners, district staff, and students in work sessions that resulted in three areas of focus for district goal setting. These areas are:

- *Early Literacy* – how well are students learning to read in early elementary school (pre-k through third grade)
- *Algebra* – are students taking and passing Algebra I as freshman in high school.
- *Social Emotional Learning (SEL)* – how well are students learning to connect with others, develop identity, and how welcome and safe do students feel.

Both Early Literacy and Algebra goal areas are also focused on the success of black male students.

## Update

On December 1, Des Moines Public Schools staff shared the following update on the district's progress toward the Early Literacy Goals (Goals 1 and 2). The Early Literacy goal is measured by the percent of students "meeting benchmark" on the assessment that the district uses for early elementary students. This assessment is called FAST, and it measures how well students are prepared for reading compared to set expectations in areas that are necessary for reading success. Students are assessed using FAST three times a year, once in the fall (October-November), winter (January-February), and spring (April-May). Because the work regarding supporting all students and black male students is tightly aligned, a single summary report for Board Goals 1 and 2 is provided.

**Data Summary** – Because of the reduction of class time in the spring of 2020 and the shifting of instruction methods through the fall of 2020 (from virtual to in person and back), the percent of students meeting benchmark on FAST fell a great deal compared to the progress that had been made last winter. Percent of third grade students meeting benchmark:

- All students – Winter 2020: 53.9% → Fall 2020: 44.5% (-9.4%)
- Black Male students – Winter 2020: 44.4% → Fall 2020: 27.4% (-17.0%)

The outcomes on this assessment are also complicated by the fact that schools were fully virtual when students they started taking FAST this fall, meaning that there were additional struggles with technology. To review all of the data, click [here](#) (All Students – Goal 1) and [here](#) (Black Males – Goal 2).

Overall, the percent of all students in DMPS who met benchmark this fall fell at about the same rate as the percent of students from schools across the state and the region. However, the percent of black males meeting benchmark fell at a higher rate than all students. This shows that while the all students group was not set back farther than their statewide peers, black male students were more negatively affected over the last nine months in the area of Early Literacy.

**Response to Data and Current Work** – the district's ongoing work is based in research around best practices for all students, specific supports needed for black male students, and community based work from last year, including the community Collaborative Problem-Solving Process and the Anti-Racist Townhalls. The DMPS Early Literacy Task Force, which is made up of teachers, building leaders, and district leaders, has an action plan to meet the Early Literacy needs of students that is based on the community work and has three focus areas:

- Implementation of High Quality Curriculum - ensuring that all teachers are using research based tools, lessons, and assessments so that students are building skills in Early Literacy.
  - Current work includes professional learning for school leaders and coaches, monitoring implementation (to make sure that teachers are using the curriculum as intended), ensuring that the diversity/social justice/community connection aspects of the curriculum are being used, and considering the use of this curriculum at pre-kindergarten and high school.
- Access to Grade Level Instruction – making sure that all students have access to the tools, lessons, and assessments that both support them where they are as learners and at their current grade level.
  - Current work includes creating a system and process for student placement into special programs, including Gifted and Talented, English Language Learner, and Special Education. The Early Literacy

team is working with the district Community Engagement team to strengthen community partnerships promoting early literacy and working to prioritize summer early literacy programming.

- Data Literacy and Balanced Assessment System – ensuring that all teachers and school leaders understand the data that comes from the different types of assessments taken by students.
  - Recent work includes completing a professional learning plans for staff on the use of data and the Student Success Platform, as well as creating district guidance on how and when to utilize different data that are collected through the year, in order to align practices across the district.

District teams also spent a significant amount of time this fall building modules and courses in Canvas, the district's virtual learning system, to support teachers in the virtual and hybrid learning models.