

MVSU Literacy and Math Focus: Rationale

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Why a district goal of 90% proficiency in literacy and mathematics?

Literacy is a foundational skill, allowing for equitable access to learning across the curriculum and with direct impacts on life outcomes in areas such as college and career readiness, health and wellbeing, and employment opportunities. Literacy (inclusive of speaking, listening, reading and writing) is a keystone skill central to our students' achievement of each of our Portrait of a Graduate competencies: academic success, self-direction, critical thinking and problem-solving, stewardship, and skillful communication. As our educators stated when proposing this goal, "Success in reading is an issue of equity."

A diverse group of MVSU educators worked across the 2021-22 school year in a Literacy Equity and Coherence Team. After conducting research on our district's performance in literacy, a review of current research literature on literacy, and collecting feedback and support from all MVSU PreK-12 educators, they [set an ambitious goal](#) for literacy achievement: 80% of our students will achieve proficient levels of literacy through core instruction, and 90% will achieve proficiency with interventions and support. Shortly thereafter, our Math Equity Team discussed the 90% proficiency goal, and agreed to adopt the same for mathematics outcomes.

How will we know when we have met our goal? What determines proficiency?

There's no one assessment that can tell us when we've reached our goal. [Act 173 of 2018](#) required schools to act upon four levers for student success. One of the levers was the creation of a [Local Comprehensive Assessment System](#), which at the universal level, we now have solidly in place. Our district's [annual assessment calendar](#) provides a snapshot of our universal assessment system. This

calendar must legally be available to the public, and it is therefore linked under the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment portion of our MVSU District Website.

Using our assessment system, we worked with teachers, students, community members and our school board to develop a method of triangulating our most trusted data to determine whether we met our goals. And, in the spirit of positivity and celebration, we developed a mechanism for tracking our progress along the way. We call this our [Proficiency Goal Triangulation with Celebration Benchmarks](#).

Where are we right now?

Our analysis of the [23-24 proficiency triangulation](#) shows we have some initial wins:

- K-4 Dibels (literacy) and Forefront (math readiness) scores show us solidly in the silver category
- All grade levels show classroom grades in the gold
- Grades 5-10 STAR Growth results show us in the gold category, meaning 80% of our students are above the 50th percentile for growth, a key indicator of student skill growth even if they haven't reached proficiency yet.

However, we still have work to do:

- We haven't reached our baseline proficiency level yet (bronze) in Grades 5-10 STAR for both ELA and Math
- We haven't reached our baseline proficiency level yet (bronze) in Grades K-4 VTCAP (Cognia)
- We haven't reached platinum level in any part of our triangulation
- We need to work towards more clearly defining more formative aspects of our summative assessments for rapid feedback cycles

What have we done to meet our goals?

Two other important levers to implement Act 173 were used to help us meet our goals: [Needs Based Professional Development](#) and [Coordinated Curriculum](#).

For [Needs Based PD](#), we worked carefully with the teacher CBA and the reality of other constraints that exist in our system (substitutes, time, etc...) to ensure any mandatory professional development in ELA and Math was directed towards the data-based needs of students in our district. This meant training in ELA and Math was not optional. We embedded evidence-based professional development into the school day and made sure every educator of ELA or Math participated. As of 2025, every core teacher, special educator, and administrator will have been through our training system, making up for the lack of training in our feeder teacher training programs. The trainers of our teachers now have time to be in schools, working alongside principals and teachers to influence the implementation of training, a key next step in supporting teachers in meeting our goals. To read more about our professional development program for teachers, [click here](#).

For Coordinated Curriculum, we embarked on a multi-year process of evaluating the quality and effectiveness of our current ELA and Math programs. An evaluation of elementary ELA that started in 2022 resulted in the adoption of multiple evidence-based programs to increase student achievement. This included a new Core ELA resource, a new handwriting program, a refined scope and sequence for our phonemic awareness and phonics program, volumes of decodable books, a new spelling program, a subscription to NewsELA for grades 5-12, and paired texts for comprehension practice. With these resources in place, educators are engaging in the important work of implementing them with clarity and engagement for students. An evaluation of our elementary Math program resulted in a current Mathematics Program Pilot which currently has 19 teachers participating. [Click here to learn more about the math pilot program.](#)

As a relatively recently formed school district, the amount of work needed to coordinate curriculum among five elementary schools is no small feat, however, we are making progress. [Click here to see a timeline of CIA programmatic progress](#) and [Click here to see work completed toward our literacy goals.](#)

What other VT statutes are in place supporting this work?

Districts across the state are learning to use valid assessments of student achievement to guide their instruction. This is now the law in Vermont, with the passage of Act 139 in Spring of 2024, posted [here](#), and explained by the VT Family Network [here](#). The ongoing work at MVSU to support literacy instruction and achievement are closely aligned with key features of this landmark bill, including:

- Grades K-3 students “shall be” assessed with valid and reliable measures, and their parents or guardians notified of results significantly below benchmarks and the school’s instructional response.
 - Instruction provided to such students shall be evidence-based and explicitly and systematically address the foundational concepts of literacy proficiency.
- The bill also states that “All students need to receive systematic and explicit evidence-based reading instruction ... to ensure that all students learn to read by the end of the third grade.”
- Schools are required to provide professional development to all teachers and administrators in systematic and explicit evidence-based reading instruction and the use of evidence-based assessments to guide instruction. Schools are also required to report the fulfillment of this requirement.

Act 139 mandates evidence-aligned assessment, instruction, and professional development so “all” students learn to read. This will require concerted, focus effort across multiple years. MVSU is well on its way to establishing systems to comply with this law, but much work remains.

What other MVSU documents support this focus?

- [MVSU Teaching & Learning Policy](#) Adopted September 2023
- [2024-2029 Strategic Plan](#) Spring 2024

Does this mean science and social studies won’t happen anymore?

No.

In September, 2023, a new literacy schedule and a new [Core ELA resource](#) were both implemented at the elementary level. At grades K-3, of four ELA modules in a year, a minimum of three address science or social studies topics. For example, modules in our ELA program focus on meteorology and botany in Kindergarten, astronomy and physiology in Grade 1, and anthecology and geology in Grade 2. Other grade levels have modules on the American Revolution, Human Rights, and the 19th Amendment. The first year implementing a new program in a new schedule can be a challenge, and I thank our teachers for continuing to work with the program this year.

Elementary schedules have decreased time for “separate” chunks of science and social studies in the day. They’ve increased the opportunity for integrating engaging topics within the ELA block, and in some grade levels, the math block, too. Integration is a skill that will develop over time as our teachers become more familiar and facile with our ELA and Math programs.

In Summer, 2024, grant funds were secured through the federal Title Grant, allowing MVSU to provide stipends for elementary teachers to collaboratively develop units of science that link with their ELA modules. Not every grade was represented in this summer’s work, however, we began the process of providing teachers the time and space to make integrated connections between subjects.

In September, 2024, new [Literacy Timeframes](#) were introduced at the upper elementary levels to allow for more discrete science and social studies times in the week. In addition, Principals are engaging in a time study K-6 to determine a “current state” of science and social studies in their schools by grade level. The School Leadership Team will consider this information and develop next steps to take to move forward our ELA practice while simultaneously increasing student ability to engage with Science and Social Studies. And, the result of this might mean more adjustments to our elementary schedule until we get it right. In the spirit of engineering and science, we are iterating!

What do I say when a teacher or community member says “Is it true that the district cut science and social studies?”

MVSU has engaged with the research and knows no student is literate without knowledge of the world. Comprehension increases with students having knowledge about context. Science and Social Studies are key to understanding and engagement. Sherry is not cutting out science and social studies. Our district is moving toward a system that ensures those subjects increase literacy in our students.

Encourage teachers to meet with their principals to discuss and improve their schedule and time use. Also encourage them to meet with Julie Brown or Patty Kelly to refine their instructional practices in ELA and Math as well as integrate science and social studies into their literacy and math blocks of time. Both Julie and Patty will increase their time in schools now that training is in place.

What do goals like ours mean for future budget considerations?

Whether we are budgeting time or money, goals like ours means we must prioritize.

Budgeting time: Elementary school days are scheduled down to the minute. Principals must work strategically with the [Literacy Timeframes](#) we developed using research, support from expert consultants like New Solutions K12, and the evidence-based program materials we use as resources in each subject. Time is the most precious resource we have to work with when prioritizing our goals. As Dr. Tim Shanahan explains [here](#), time for instruction matters for literacy achievement.

Our principals are making building schedules that consider all constraints, all wants, and also, our priorities. They are masterful at using what they have to make magic happen in their schedules. Teacher integration of subjects within their allocated ELA and Math time is one way to help with time budgeting.

Budgeting money: We had the fortune of ESSER III funds to support professional development and resource procurement over the past few years. With the phasing out of ESSER funds, and a state level funding squeeze, we must make prioritized decisions for spending. Our goals in Literacy and Math can be one of the important considerations in that decision making.

Are our goals too ambitious?

No.

MVSU's goals for literacy align with guidelines from the VT Agency of Education, which explains in [this report](#) that effective universal instruction should result in just 10-15% of students requiring supplemental instruction to reach proficiency (p.4). An example of a Massachusetts district that realized such ambitious goals is highlighted in [this](#) 3-part podcast series. We are defining proficiency and progress toward this goal within our available assessment system, and establishing mechanisms for tracking our progress. Raising achievement includes raising expectations.

Our goals are attainable with concerted effort across schools and disciplines. Consider: 62% of MVSU's 3rd-grade students reached proficiency in English language arts in 2024 as measured by VT's state-wide assessment, Cognia. Increasing this cohort of students' proficiency by 3 percentage points per year would result in 89% of our students graduating with proficient levels of literacy. This example highlights the need for evidence-based, effective instruction across our schools and grades, PreK-12.

Additionally, with the passage of [Act 139](#), evidence-based literacy instruction is now the law in Vermont. Act 139 requires that all K-3 students receive explicit, systematic literacy instruction and learn to read by the end of 3rd grade. In the coming months, we will hear more about this Act and what it means for schools across our state.

As awareness of school district insufficiencies in the area of literacy increases, some districts and states nationwide have constituents questioning whether their rights under the 14th Amendment have been curtailed or violated. Alongside [US Federal Courts](#), the [NAACP](#), the [United Nations](#), the [Ontario Human Rights Commission](#), and many others, the educators of MVSU acknowledge reading as a right and are working with enthusiasm to meet our ambitious goals.

Thank you for considering this information, and thank you to our educators and board members for their ambitiously relentless dedication to the students in our district.

September, 2024