Commonwealth of Virginia
Virginia Department of Education
Superintendent's Memo #071-21

DATE: March 19, 2021
TO: Division Superintendents
FROM: James F. Lane, Ed.D., Superintendent of Public Instruction
SUBJECT: **Changes to Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) Spring 2021 Testing Window for Grades PreK-3**

The purpose of the Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI) is to provide early reading intervention services to students in Kindergarten through the third grade who demonstrate deficiencies reflected in their performance on a diagnostic literacy screening tool. Participating divisions are required to use the state-provided diagnostic screening instrument, Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), or a diagnostic screening instrument approved by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

Literacy screening is a critical component of evidenced-based reading instruction and intervention. Screening helps to make children's learning needs and vulnerabilities visible to support schools and teachers in working efficiently to support children's learning. The data are also important to making decisions regarding the format of instruction and the ways to allocate time and resources in support of equitable outcomes for children. This issue is particularly critical in the spring of 2021, given the variety of learning modes that occurred as a result of COVID-19.

Fall data from PALS show that students began the 2020-2021 school year with less well-developed early literacy skills than in previous years. PALS data from fall 2020 show 27.2 percent of Kindergarten students and 28.5 percent of first-grade students started the school year at high-risk for reading failure. This reflects a significantly elevated percentage of students below the PALS benchmark, when compared to previous years. There were disproportionate increases in children falling below the PALS benchmark this year, compared

to last year, among students who are Black, Hispanic, children from low-income backgrounds, and English learners. Given these trends, it is critical for schools and divisions to examine how students' literacy skills and risks in literacy development may have changed across the school year. The spring window for PALS offers an important data point for educators and for planning instruction and support in the coming year.

The VDOE is working closely with the [Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) office](#) to ensure our public schools are able to administer the PALS assessment in flexible ways this spring 2021. This flexibility ensures that data are collected to support instruction and intervention, while also offering an approach that allows school divisions time to plan for testing all K-2 students. The key parameters for the spring testing window are summarized below.

Testing Window

Change: Testing window will be extended and open April 19, 2021 and close June 4, 2021 for PALS-PreK, PALS-K, and PALS 1-3 testing.

The testing window for spring 2021 will be available beginning Monday April 19, 2021 and remain open through June 4, 2021, to allow for one-on-one-testing of all students. Divisions have the flexibility to run their testing window as they traditionally have (i.e., for a two week testing window) or extend it across the full testing window. Divisions will also make decisions based on the needs of their communities to determine how they will administer the battery of PALS tasks to each K-2 student.

Spring Task Administration

Change: Spring 2021 will allow for both in-person and remote task administration for PALS PreK, PALS K, and PALS 1-3. In all cases, however, in-person testing is preferred. In-person testing is the method of assessment that has the most validation. Testing in-person also offers the student a 1:1 experience with the teacher. In the fall, over 55 percent of all testing in Kindergarten and first grade was remote; however, many divisions that were in virtual instruction were able to plan for in-person testing for some or all of their students. For children attending school remotely, it is allowable for divisions to organize testing slots that administer 1:1 testing in-person as long as they are following the local and state health and

safety guidelines and the PALS office has resources to support testing when in-person within the current health and safety guidelines.

When in-person testing is not possible, however, collecting PALS data as a means of understanding early risk in reading and guiding instruction is critical through the remote testing option. Upon logging into the PALS portal, teachers will be able to choose, per child, the method of testing (i.e., remote/hybrid or in-person). The [PALS office has released training materials](#) to guide your use of this process. All mandatory subtasks required to calculate a summed score can be given remotely for K-3.

It is important to note that remote testing is a form of nonstandard test administration. This means that K-3 students who complete the battery of tasks in this way will not be eligible for a change in Identification status (i.e., students will not be either newly Identified or un-Identified); however, task scores and summed scores that fall below benchmarks will be highlighted in red and noted as students who are "at risk" for reading difficulties. There are reports within the PALS portal, at the school and division level, indicating the identity of these students.

Kindergarten and First-Grade Battery Adjustments

Change for Kindergarten: Concept of Word (COW) will not be administered as part of the PALS test. However, students will have two alternative subtasks for spring 2021 that will be mandatory for Kindergarten (see the section below).

The COW subtask in Kindergarten requires that instructional time is taken during school in preparation for this task. There are many reasons that teachers and schools may not be able to use instructional time this way. Therefore, for spring 2021, the PALS Office has adjusted the online testing and scoring system to allow kindergarten teachers to bypass this part of the Kindergarten battery. **Omitting this subtask for spring 2021 will not impact the ability to calculate a summed score for kindergarten students**.

Change for Kindergarten and First Grade: To replace the COW subtest this spring and to add critical information to the first-grade battery, Kindergarten and first-grade teachers will be asked to administer two additional subtasks to all students. These two tasks are the Blending subtask and Sound-to-Letter subtask. These subtasks offer a means of examining young children's phonological awareness in ways that extend from the traditional battery and are critical for planning instruction and understanding students who may be vulnerable in their

literacy development. Although these tasks are not part of the benchmark scoring system, they will appear on student reports and will be prompted by the PALS system as mandatory. If students received perfect (or near perfect, ~90 percent) scores on *Blending* (18 out of 20 max) and *Sound-to-Letter* (36 out of 40 max) in the fall, the teacher may enter the same score for the spring. These two subtasks can help support teachers in evidence-based instructional planning.

Change for PreK: The same adjustments to the PALS PreK Battery that were in place for fall also apply to the spring administration. It is not recommended to give the PALS Nursery Rhyme task as it is a task that is difficult to interpret, and instructionally, it does not provide essential information about young children's literacy development. For remote administration, the Print and Word Awareness task is not able to be administered.

Early Intervention Reading Initiative State Funds for Fiscal Year 2022

The purpose of the Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI) is to provide early reading intervention services to students in Kindergarten through the third grade who demonstrate deficiencies reflected in their performance on a diagnostic literacy screening tool. For funding purposes, EIRI is calculated using the spring PALS data from the previous school year.

For Fiscal Year 2022, EIRI funding will be calculated using either a school division's number of students Identified on the PALS assessment given in-person **and/or** the number of students noted as "at risk" based on their scores from the remote testing option. These calculations will only be used for FY22. There will be division and school reports within the PALS portal that will offer a look at both groups of students.

For more information

If you have questions regarding EIRI funding, please contact the Budget Office by email at doebudgetoffice@doe.virginia.gov or by telephone at (804) 225-2025. Questions regarding EIRI programmatic issues should be addressed to Carmen Kurek, Elementary English/Reading Specialist, by email at Carmen.Kurek@doe.virginia.gov or by telephone at (804) 225-3203.

Questions regarding the PALS online services should be addressed to Beth Williams, PALS Project Manager, by email at PALS@virginia.edu or by telephone at (888) 882-7257.

JFL/CEK/pk

    A. Attachment: EIRI Assessment Schedule 2020-2021 (DOCX)