



**#217-21**

**Commonwealth of Virginia  
Virginia Department of Education  
Superintendent's Memo #217-21**

**DATE:** August 6, 2021  
**TO:** Division Superintendents  
**FROM:** James F. Lane, Ed.D., Superintendent of Public Instruction  
**SUBJECT:** **Future Updates to the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)**

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on early literacy learning in Virginia. [PALS data from Spring 2021](#) showed that significantly more students (1.8 times as many) ended the school year at high risk for reading difficulties as compared to Spring 2019 data. Moreover, the data show that literacy learning of students who are Black, Hispanic, English learners, or come from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately identified as at high-risk for reading difficulties. The PALS K-3 screener identifies students at-risk in early reading and this guides the allocation of EIRI funding to support early reading intervention.

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 literacy screening tool. Participating divisions are required to use the state-provided screener, PALS, or a screening instrument approved by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

Screening students is a critical component of evidenced-based reading instruction and intervention. Screening helps to make students' learning needs and vulnerabilities visible to schools and teachers so that they are able to efficiently 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 students.

The VDOE is collaborating with the University of Virginia's PALS office to revise and expand the state supported PreK3-3rd grade literacy screener. Revising the state-supported literacy screener is necessary to align Virginia with the current scientific evidence-base and for consistency with contemporary measures of early literacy and reading development. Updating the literacy screener will provide a more comprehensive understanding of individual student learning needs.

This updated early literacy screener will provide a battery of reading screening tasks to include subtests that examine phonological awareness, decoding, encoding, oral reading fluency, processing speed/rapid automatized naming, and oral language.

Additionally, the demographics of Virginia have shifted in recent decades with a considerable increase of Spanish-speaking English learners. Developmental studies of reading in this population of students suggest the importance of both native and second language and literacy inputs to long-term reading outcomes. Implementation of an updated measure will include a supplemental Spanish language assessment for PK-3 English learners.

A task force of educators, parents, university representatives, and community members, along with national experts, will provide external and national guidance to Virginia's assessment model in language and literacy, and will support an intentional approach to statewide adoption and the transition from PALS to the new literacy screener.

It is anticipated that the updated PALS assessment will be fully implemented in Fall 2024.

### For more information

If you have questions regarding EIRI funding, please contact the Budget Office by email at [doebudgetoffice@doe.virginia.gov](mailto:doebudgetoffice@doe.virginia.gov). Questions regarding EIRI programmatic issues should be addressed to Carmen Kurek, Elementary English/Reading Specialist, by email at [instruction@doe.virginia.gov](mailto:instruction@doe.virginia.gov). Questions regarding the PALS online services should be addressed to Beth Williams, PALS Project Manager, by email at [PALS@virginia.edu](mailto:PALS@virginia.edu) or by telephone at (888) 882-7257.

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