



# Lincoln Public Schools

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Superintendent of Schools

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Dear Lincoln Public Schools Families,

Well, we made it through our first winter storm! Thank you to all of you who woke up early in the snow and cold to get your children on the bus Tuesday morning; who walked to and from school in some very wintry weather; who drove carefully through the slush in the afternoon to pick your children up; and who were flexible as we needed to cancel our after-school activities. I also want to thank our staff, who helped with morning arrival and dismissal and braved their own wintry journeys to get to and from work. And my biggest thank you goes to our facilities staff, who were up early and stuck around late to make sure the schools were ready to receive students and staff safely.

In this week's message, I wanted to talk a bit about literacy. This is prompted by two recent events: we are in the process of conducting our mid-year literacy screening for our elementary students, and there was a recent article in the Boston Globe that highlighted some of the current controversies around literacy curricula.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts recently put in place a new requirement that districts screen students twice per year around reading in grades kindergarten through third grade, and then reach out to the families of students who score significantly below district benchmarks (in other words, students who are struggling in reading). In Lincoln we already had screening processes in place, so this aligned naturally with work we had already been doing. We also assess students three times per year, not just the two times the state requires: we do benchmark assessments in the fall to get an initial picture of how students are doing, and then we screen in the winter and spring (the winter screening is what took place this last week).

Early reading skills are critical for students. This is especially true as children get older and so much of the information they learn across subjects comes via reading. And so it is vitally important for us to be able to identify students who might be struggling as early as possible and put supports in place.

Which brings me to the second topic: literacy curricula. In Lincoln we primarily use the Units of Study curriculum for literacy in the elementary grades. In several of our primary grades we also supplement the literacy curriculum with the Foundations phonics program, but Units of Study is our primary curriculum, and it has been a topic of controversy recently: at the state level, Units of Study has not been identified as high quality.

In my own experience a curriculum is only one piece of a larger puzzle. In fact, I have found that a high-quality curriculum that is poorly implemented can be less effective than a mediocre curriculum in the hands of a highly effective teacher. Nevertheless, what our

students deserve is both: high-quality teachers (which we are fortunate to have in abundance in Lincoln) teaching high-quality curricula.

All districts should have in place a regular curriculum review cycle whereby they review, revise, and potentially replace curricula on a recurring, multi-year calendar. The Assistant Superintendent, Torrance Lewis, and I will be working together to ensure that we have a clear curriculum review cycle established in Lincoln, and our early literacy programs will be one of our first priorities for review. Done well, a curriculum review does not happen overnight – it takes time, collaboration with teachers, and careful planning to execute well – but our students deserve that we take a detailed, careful look at our reading programs as soon as possible.

One final note of clarification. In the article in the Globe, the reporters provided an inaccurate characterization of the School Committee's efforts around prioritizing literacy and taking action around achievement disparities between different student groups. The article seemed to suggest that the School Committee had discussed student data several years ago and then not taken any follow-on steps. My experience with the School Committee has been the exact opposite: they have been fully engaged in wanting to understand what we can do to improve student achievement, and in wanting to support any efforts to that end. I have been interviewed enough by reporters to know that words can be taken out of context, and that a sensational story can take priority over an accurate one. It's unfortunate and frustrating when that occurs, so I wanted to take a moment to set the record straight.

Thank you, and have a wonderful weekend!

Parry Graham

Superintendent