DATE: June 26, 2020

TO: Division Superintendents

FROM: James F. Lane, Ed.D., Superintendent of Public Instruction

SUBJECT: Changes to Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) Fall Testing Window for Grades K-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).

Screening students 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 this fall, given the school closures that occurred as a result of COVID-19.

The Virginia Department of Education 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 fall. We are continuing to work on specific details and answers to the questions we know you will have. However, to support planning, we want to share the decisions that have been made, to date. The focus is to ensure that data are collected to support instruction and intervention, while also offering an approach that allows school divisions greater flexibility in order to plan for testing all K-2 students and certain third-grade students. The key parameters for the fall testing window are summarized below. Similar guidance for the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP), which includes PALS as the literacy assessment, is forthcoming.
**Flexible Testing Window**

**Change:** Testing window can open as early as July 15, 2020 and end November 15, 2020

The fall testing window for the 2020-2021 school year will be available beginning Wednesday July 15, 2020 and remain open through November 19, 2020, to allow for one on-one-testing of all students. This extended window also gives divisions more flexibility. Divisions can decide to run their testing window as they traditionally have (i.e., after two weeks of instruction for Grades 1-3, after six weeks of instruction in kindergarten). Alternatively, divisions can use the full length of the window and begin testing, even before children re-enter school for the fall and/or can test across a wider timeframe. What is important to note is that, during this window, school divisions will make decisions based on the needs of their communities to determine how they will administer the battery of PALS tasks to each student.

**Testing All K-2 Students**

**Change:** Testing all students in Grades K-2

Administration of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS) assessment is required for this fall. The PALS assessment must be administered in-person. The PALS office will be providing guidance on how the assessment can be administered with social distancing protocols in place (e.g., a student and teacher sitting six feet apart and/or assessing students while wearing masks). As stated in the EIRI assessment schedule, the fall testing window requires all students in Kindergarten to be tested, only students in Grades 1-3 who are new to Virginia public schools and students who received summer intervention. Due to the COVID-19 school closure, there was no PALS testing during spring 2020. In order to obtain the most current information on these students for instructional and remediation purposes, the PALS test will be administered to all students in grades Kindergarten through Grade 2 during the fall 2020 testing window. The requirement for Grade 3 will remain the same as is stated in the current schedule.

**Kindergarten Battery Adjustments**

**Change:** Concept of Word (COW) is not a mandatory measure for fall

The COW subtask requires that instructional time is taken during the first six weeks of school in preparation for this task. There are many reasons that teachers and schools may not want to or be able to use instructional time this way. The PALS Office has adjusted the online testing system to allow kindergarten teachers to bypass this part of the kindergarten battery. **Skipping this subtask for fall will not impact the ability to calculate a sum score for kindergarten students.**

To replace the COW subtest this fall, the PALS office recommends that kindergarten teachers take advantage of two additional subtasks being made available this year to all students. These two tasks are the blending subtask and a letter to sound subtask. These tasks offer a means of examining young children’s phonological awareness in ways that extend from the traditional kindergarten battery. The PALS office recommends the use of these tasks in kindergarten and in Grade 1 for all students. These tasks can help support teachers in evidence-based instructional planning. The PALS office will be creating resources to support teachers in administering and using the data.
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

Attachment:

A. EIRI Assessment Schedule 2020-2021