ASSESSMENT AND THE
5 Big Ideas

1. Phonemic Awareness

Overview

Activities that promote phonemic awareness and phonological awareness can positively impact the reading achievement of all students in the primary grades—from the kindergarten student for whom literacy acquisition is likely to come almost as naturally as language acquisition to the third-grade student still struggling to make sense of written language. The first step in designing an instructional plan that addresses students’ individual phonemic awareness needs is assessing their level of phonemic awareness.

Because phonemic awareness is an important foundational skill of beginning reading and a reliable predictor of success in learning to read, it is crucial to discover and monitor students’ levels of phonemic awareness. Monitoring students’ individual levels of phonemic awareness will alert you to problems and enable you to intervene to correct deficiencies before they hinder reading.

In kindergarten and first grade, students’ phonemic awareness should be measured multiple times during the year. In second grade and third grade, phonemic awareness measures can be used as diagnostic tools to determine if a low level of phonemic awareness is the cause of reading difficulties.

In fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, phonemic awareness will not be assessed. Students at this stage who still struggle with phonemic awareness typically are served through special programs.

An effective tool for measuring phonemic awareness should…

- have established reliability and validity.
- provide benchmarks for performance.
- assess individual performance on a continuum of development.
- be administered easily and without stress.
- be administered individually in a short period of time.
**Student Monitoring**

The **Initial Sound Fluency** (ISF) measure assesses a student’s ability to recognize and produce the initial sound in a word presented orally. This test should be used from the beginning through the middle of kindergarten. It can also be used in prekindergarten. The **Phoneme Segmentation Fluency** (PSF) measure assesses a student’s ability to segment three- and four-phoneme words into individual phonemes. Testing for Phoneme Segmentation Fluency should begin at midyear in kindergarten. This test should be administered again at the end of kindergarten and at the beginning, middle, and end of first grade.

Administering these assessment measures is a learned skill. Like learning any other new skill, it takes time and practice to become proficient. It is not expected that you will read about Initial Sound Fluency and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency and immediately become an expert at administering these assessment measures.

**Reading Academy Phonemic Awareness Module** discusses the assessment practices for DIBELS Equivalent Measures, the Vital Indicators of Progress (VIP), for Initial Sound Fluency and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency.

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**II. Phonics**

*Overview*

Understanding the alphabetic principle evolves through a number of different stages. At the beginning is the simple awareness that letters have something to do with written language. Usually developing concurrently with the awareness that writing and print are made up of letters is the ability to recognize and name letters. The realization that letters stand for sounds and that two words that begin with the same letter usually also begin with the same sound comes next. This basic realization of the connection between letters and sounds eventually evolves into the understanding that the letters from left to right in a printed word represent the sounds from beginning to end in a spoken word.

Understanding the alphabetic principle is, like phonemic awareness, an essential foundational skill for reading. It is, therefore, important to discover what students know and understand about letters before they begin to read. As their reading skills develop, it is important to determine how well they are able to use letter-sound correspondences in word identification. Assessing students’ understanding of the alphabetic principle...
can help identify deficiencies so that appropriate instructional support can be provided.

Monitoring the development of word recognition skills involves observing and recording, coaching, and working with individual students to gain insight into the strategies they use to read words.

**Student Monitoring**

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) provides two measures that offer insight into students’ understanding of the alphabetic principle—**Letter Naming Fluency** (LNF) and **Nonsense Word Fluency** (NWF). Both are individually administered tests. Understanding the alphabetic principle of language begins with simple sight recognition of the letters of the alphabet. The Letter Naming Fluency measure assesses students’ ability to recognize and name uppercase and lowercase letters. This test should be used at the beginning, middle, and end of kindergarten and at the beginning of first grade. The Nonsense Word Fluency measure assesses students’ knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and their ability to use letter-sound knowledge to read unfamiliar words. Testing for Nonsense Word Fluency should begin at the end of kindergarten. This test should be administered again at the beginning, middle, and end of first grade.

**Reading Academy Phonics and Word Study Module** explores the administration and practice of using the VIP measures.
III. Fluency

Overview
The complex relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension suggests that as soon as students have acquired letter-sound knowledge, regular assessment of their oral reading fluency should be part of reading instruction. Informal and formal assessment of reading fluency should be done regularly. The most informal assessment is simply listening to students read aloud. By listening to students read, you can make judgments about their progress in fluency, as well as note types of words that cause difficulty. There are several procedures for formal assessment. The easiest procedure is simply to time students as they read to determine how many words they read correctly in one minute. You can compare their performance with established norms and chart their progress over time.

An effective tool for measuring oral reading fluency should:

• use standardized passages calibrated for the grade level.
• provide benchmarks for performance.
• assess individual performance on a continuum of development.
• be administered easily and without stress.
• incorporate an explicit comprehension check.

Student Monitoring
The easiest way to assess students’ reading fluency informally is to listen as they read aloud. Students should have many opportunities to read aloud while you listen. In addition to providing the chance to monitor students’ reading and make judgments about their fluency development, these reading sessions have other valuable benefits:

• Necessary practice for students in reading aloud, which develops their reading fluency
• The opportunity to learn from students’ reading regarding the types of words which are causing word recognition difficulties
• The chance to coach students in using word recognition strategies
• The opportunity to help students make sense of what they read as they read it
For fluency practice and informal fluency assessment, it is recommended that students read texts that are relatively easy and contain mostly words they know or can decode easily. The texts should be at students’ independent reading level; that is, students should be able to read the texts with 95 percent accuracy. No more than 1 in 20 words, or 5 percent, should be difficult for them to read.

Regular informal assessment allows you to monitor students’ fluency development and make judgments about their progress. The reading fluency assessment should, however, also include more formal measures of fluency. This allows you to compare students’ reading rates with established norms and to chart fluency development over time.

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) includes a standardized, individually administered measure of accuracy and fluency in reading connected text called Oral Reading Fluency (ORF). ORF is a standardized set of three passages and procedures designed to monitor students’ progress in reading fluency and to identify students who may need instructional support. ORF measures reading fluency by having students read aloud for one minute. The reading passages used in ORF are carefully calibrated to represent the target reading level for each grade. Students’ oral reading fluency rate is determined by the number of words correctly read in one minute.

**Reading Academy Fluency Module** provides more information about monitoring students’ fluency development and the VIP assessment of Oral Reading Fluency.
IV. Vocabulary

Overview
The acquisition of word knowledge is one of the most important learning achievements that occurs between the time children utter their first word and when they finish high school. How successful children are in building their vocabulary repertoires has significant impact on their ability to read, learn, write, and think. There are differing estimates of how many words children typically learn each year, and the pace is different at different periods. It has been estimated that in the preschool years, children learn an average of nine words a day. The rapid pace of early word learning has been attributed to the fact that once children figure out what naming is all about, they quickly learn the names for already familiar concepts. It has also been estimated that between first grade and third grade, children from middle-class backgrounds learn about 5,000 new words every year, while children from disadvantaged homes learn only about 3,000 words a year.

Before children enter school, virtually all of the words they learn are learned indirectly. They learn words from conversations they participate in and conversations they overhear. They learn words from books that are read to them and from TV shows they watch. Even after they begin school and are exposed to some direct teaching of vocabulary words, children continue to acquire new vocabulary indirectly. Vocabulary growth appears to occur without much help from teachers. The problem is that it does not occur at the same rate for all children, and children who are learning fewer words are at a definite disadvantage. The challenge for teachers throughout the grade levels, but especially in the primary grades, is to identify students who have deficit vocabulary knowledge and help those students improve their chances for vocabulary growth.

Research indicates that a child’s socioeconomic background is a strong predictor of vocabulary knowledge. However, professional decisions about providing instructional support for vocabulary growth should not be based solely on children’s socioeconomic background. It is important to assess individual students’ vocabulary knowledge, initially, to determine which students are lagging behind in vocabulary acquisition and, regularly, to monitor the success of efforts to improve vocabulary growth. Consider how you currently gather information about students’ vocabulary knowledge.
**Student Monitoring**
Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) provides an individually administered measure of vocabulary knowledge called **Word Use Fluency** (WUF). WUF is designed to monitor students’ vocabulary development and to identify students who are at risk for poor language and reading outcomes. WUF measures students’ vocabulary knowledge by asking them to use given words in sentences. The number of words students use in creating a correct context for the given word is counted. The total number of words they use correctly in phrases, expressions, and sentences in one minute determines their word use fluency rate. The WUF measure should be administered at regular intervals, three times a year, from the beginning of kindergarten through the end of third grade.

**Reading Academy Vocabulary Development Module** explores the VIP assessment of Word Use Fluency. (NYS has not indicated this assessment as part of the Reading First initiative, however).

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**V. Comprehension**

**Overview**
Teaching children the basics of reading—word recognition and fluency—can be accomplished in a few years. Developing children’s ability to comprehend what they read is a much longer and more complicated process. This process begins before children are able to read on their own and continues long after they have become independent readers.

The ability to comprehend text is a process of maturation and sophistication. Prereaders listening to a text read aloud use basically the same thought processes to understand what they are hearing that proficient readers use as they read text. Moreover, as early as kindergarten, it is possible to help students begin developing the mental strategies used by proficient readers.

As with any skill that develops over time, it is important to monitor students’ progress along the continuum. This requires regular and ongoing assessment to discover not only what children can read and comprehend but also how they comprehend. Assessing what students can read helps you select materials that are at the appropriate level of complexity and difficulty. Assessing how children comprehend—that is, discovering what strategies they use to process text—provides the information needed to help them build on strategies they already use and to introduce new ones.
**Student Monitoring**

Helping students develop the cognitive strategies that are involved in comprehension requires understanding what happens in their minds as they read and make meaning from text. Effective diagnostic comprehension assessment should provide a "window" into what is going on in students’ minds. Knowing how students process text—what strategies they use and how effectively they use them—will help you provide the modeling and instruction needed to build on the strategies they already use and to introduce new ones. Achieving this kind of insight requires assessment techniques that prompt students to reveal their thoughts as they read.

**Reading Academy Comprehension Module** further explores informal assessments that can be used to gain insight into a student’s comprehension development.