

# Using DIBELS

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## To Improve Reading Outcomes

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Students' reading trajectories (i.e., their general pattern of reading progress) are established early and are relatively stable over time. For example, students who are poor readers in first grade are likely (i.e., 88%) to be poor readers in fourth-grade. Prevention is key to improving reading outcomes and involves identifying children who are at-risk for reading failure early (i.e., kindergarten and first-grade) and providing systematic instruction on skills needed for reading success. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) were designed to help educators in the early identification of students most at-risk for reading failure. Once students are identified, DIBELS can be used to monitor progress of interventions that are implemented. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the DIBELS measures and describe how they can be used for screening and progress monitoring to improve reading outcomes.

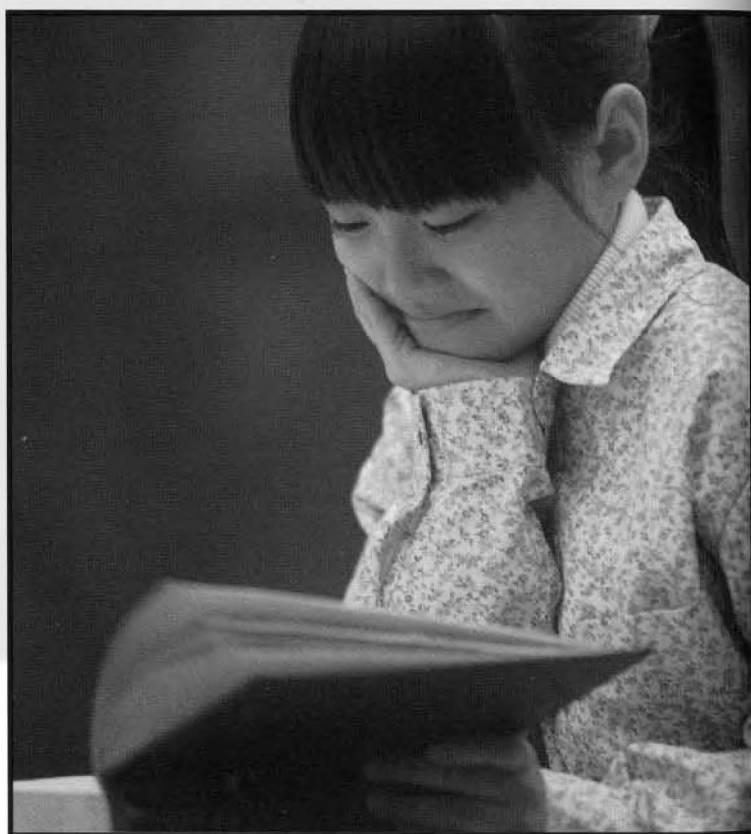
### DIBELS: Assessing the "Big Ideas" in Beginning Reading

DIBELS were designed around the "big ideas" in beginning reading or the component skills students must have to become good readers. These component skills include phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle (i.e., knowing that sounds map onto individual letters and the letters can be blended to form words), accuracy and fluency with connected text, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. Table 1 provides an overview of each DIBELS measure including the big idea that is assessed, the behavior students must demonstrate to receive a score, when to administer each measure, and benchmark goals students must meet to be on track for reading success.

Letter Naming Fluency (not listed in Table 1) is another DIBELS measure that is administered from the beginning of kindergarten through the end of first grade. It does not measure one of the big ideas of beginning reading, but can be used by educators to further determine student risk for reading failure.

### Key Features of DIBELS

The key features of DIBELS make them excellent measures for screening and progress monitoring. First, DIBELS are reliable and valid "indicators" of early reading skills. Similar to the way your doctor



gathers indicators (e.g., weight, blood pressure, temperature) during each office visit to assess your overall physical health, DIBELS were designed to provide teachers with "indicators" of students' overall early literacy health. For example, if a student is significantly behind in phonological awareness at the end of kindergarten as measured by the DIBELS Phoneme Segmentation Fluency Measure, this is an indicator that the student is not on track for being a reader by the end of first grade. If a student is identified as "at-risk" for reading failure, other diagnostic reading assessments should be administered to determine which intervention is appropriate for the student.

Another key feature of the DIBELS measures is that they are sensitive to change over time. Unlike other reading assessments that are

Name of Measure	Big Idea Measured	Behavior Sampled	When Administered	Benchmark Goal
Initial Sound Fluency	Phonological Awareness	Student identifies initial sound by pointing to or naming pictures and produces initial sounds in words (What sound does "ball" begin with?)	Beginning and middle of kindergarten	25 correct sounds per minute by middle of kindergarten
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency	Phonological Awareness	Student is given a word and asked to say the sounds (phonemes) in the word (e.g., segment the word "cat" into "c-a-t")	Middle of kindergarten through end of first grade	35 correct sounds per minute by end of kindergarten
Nonsense Word Fluency	Alphabetic Principle	Students read aloud nonsense words such as "fip" and "vos" either by reading each sound ("f-i-p") or reading the whole word ("fip")	Middle of kindergarten through beginning of second grade	50 correct sounds per minute by middle of first grade
DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency	Fluency with Connected Text	Students read aloud from a grade level passage and the number of words read correctly (WRC) is recorded	Middle of first grade through end of sixth grade	40 WRC – end of first grade 90 WRC – end of second grade 110 WRC – end of third grade
*Retell Fluency	Comprehension	After reading a passage for 1 minute, student provides an oral retell of the passage for 1 minute	Middle of first grade through end of sixth grade	*not established
*Word Use Fluency	Vocabulary	Students are given words and asked to produce sentences using the words	Beginning of kindergarten through end of third grade	*not established

\* Retell Fluency and Word Use Fluency are the newest DIBELS measures and are considered optional assessments to administer until technical adequacy data (i.e., reliability and validity) have been gathered.

either too global to detect small improvements in student reading performance (e.g., Woodcock Reading Mastery Test) or are too time consuming to administer on a frequent basis. DIBELS can be administered on a weekly basis and are sensitive enough to detect if an intervention is working. Each DIBELS measure is standardized, time efficient to administer (1-3 min.) and has 20 alternate versions which allows for frequent, repeated measurement in areas of concern.

## Using DIBELS for Screening

Using DIBELS in a prevention-oriented framework involves assessing/screening all students, kindergarten through third-grade, three times a year (note: DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency Measure is now available through sixth grade). Each DIBELS measure has a research-based benchmark goal (See Table 1) which means that if a student meets the goal, he or she is more likely to be on track for reading. If the student does not meet the benchmark goal (e.g., reading 40 words correct per minute by the end of first-grade), he or she is at-risk for reading difficulties and will



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Table 1

need more intensive intervention to meet the next benchmark goal (e.g., 90 words read correct per minute by the end of second grade).

## Using DIBELS for Progress Monitoring

As mentioned previously, each DIBELS measure has 20 alternate versions which allow teachers to measure progress on key reading skills for students who are significantly behind. Many reading assessments teachers use such as "end of the unit" tests, increase in difficulty across the school year and thus make it difficult to measure student performance over time. The 20 versions of each DIBELS measure were designed to be of equal difficulty so that changes in scores on the measures reflect changes in student performance rather than changes related to difficulty of the material.

The key to preventing reading failure is to intervene early, intensively, and evaluate frequently to determine whether what you are doing is making a difference. Precious instructional time is lost if we wait for the end of the quarter progress reports or end of the year high stakes tests to determine whether students who are significantly behind their peers are closing the achievement gap. Weekly progress monitoring of students who are most at-risk for reading failure allows teachers to see whether an intervention is working in as little as four weeks.

## Resources for Implementing DIBELS

The goal of this article was to provide an overview of the DIBELS measures and describe how they can be used for screening and progress monitoring of early reading skills. Schools across the country and in Utah are using DIBELS in a prevention-oriented framework to improve reading outcomes for all students. For more information about DIBELS and/or to download the measures for free, log-on to: [dibels.uoregon.edu/](http://dibels.uoregon.edu/). ■

*Editors' note: How does your district/school reading program align with research-based, Reading First strategies and mandates? This article is another installment in an ongoing series on best practices for teaching reading. All issues of The Utah Special Educator will address each of the five essential reading components, one per issue, and highlight schools, programs and teachers that successfully apply these best practice criteria. A compilation of current and future articles in this reading series can be found at [www.updc.org/specialeducator/index.html](http://www.updc.org/specialeducator/index.html)*