



DIBELS® Tips for Families

What is DIBELS and Why Does Our School Use it?

DIBELS stands for **Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills**. DIBELS is a series of quick assessments that schools use to determine if students may be struggling with reading and need additional help. In other words, DIBELS tells teachers if students are at risk in reading and the type of help they may need. Teachers use DIBELS to inform their reading instruction for students in grades K-8.

The critical skills necessary for successful beginning reading include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The DIBELS measures assess students on four of these five critical skills, which are often referred to as the “Big Ideas” of reading. The table on the last page lists the DIBELS measure, the corresponding Big Idea, when that skill is assessed, and why it’s important. Depending on grade level, DIBELS will measure different critical skills. A student in first grade will be measured on all the early literacy skills like phonemic awareness, phonics (decoding), and fluency with words and text. Students in the fourth through eighth grade will be measured on fluency and comprehension. You may notice that vocabulary, one of the five big ideas, is missing from the table. That’s because DIBELS doesn’t currently measure vocabulary.

Is My Child Being Benchmarked, Screened, or Progress Monitored?

Benchmark Assessment

All students in a school building are typically given the DIBELS test three times each year. This occurs at the beginning, middle, and end of year (fall, winter, and spring). This school-wide testing is called benchmark assessment. Benchmarks have risk categories that help teachers identify students who need intervention to reach grade level reading goals. Benchmark assessments generally take 2 to 6 minutes to give, depending on the grade of the student and time of year.

Screening

The DIBELS Benchmark Assessment is a screener for reading difficulties. It gives an indicator of overall reading risk by predicting to students' end of year reading achievement. Just like using a thermometer to take your child's temperature, which provides a quick indicator of your child's general health, these quick DIBELS tests provide teachers with information about reading health and how well a student is progressing on a particular early reading skill.

Progress Monitoring

School personnel may also regularly check on the progress of students who receive extra reading help to make sure their reading skills are improving. These regular checks are called progress monitoring. Students who are progress monitored may complete one or two of the individual DIBELS subtests as often as every 2 weeks or as little as once every 6 weeks depending on school resources and the needs of the student.

What are Risk Categories?

Results of DIBELS subtests are categorized according to the risk, or likelihood, that students will meet end-of-year grade-level goals in reading. The categories were determined based on research in which DIBELS and end-of-year reading tests were administered to many students across the country.

BLUE - Negligible risk: Students with negligible risk are on track for reading success and should continue to receive the instruction they are getting – sometimes called “Core Support.” We might call these students "Above Benchmark."

GREEN - Minimal risk: Students with minimal risk are on track for reading success and should continue receiving the instruction that they are getting – sometimes called “Core Support.” We might call these students "At Benchmark."

YELLOW - Some risk: Students with some risk may be struggling with one or more components of reading. They need additional instruction, usually in a small group setting. Their progress should be monitored in the area in which they are struggling. In other words, these students need "Strategic Support."

RED - At risk: Students at risk are struggling with reading, either scoring well below the benchmark or struggling with more than one component of reading. They need extra instruction in a small group or one-on-one setting. Their progress should be monitored in the areas in which they are struggling. In other words, these students need "Intensive Support."

What About Percentiles?

First, percentiles are not like grades. If your child's score is at the 40th percentile, that's not the same as getting 40% on an assignment at school. If your child's score is at the 40th percentile on DIBELS that means they scored as well as or better than 40% of students in the same grade at the same time of year. Scoring 40% on an assignment means your child got 40% of the points possible on that assignment which would be a failing grade

Most students who fall in the 40th percentile or above on DIBELS are in the **minimal** or **negligible** risk categories. That means with continued regular instruction in reading, they are likely to be a successful reader.

Sometimes percentiles can be confusing if your child is a very good reader – say in the 90th percentile for Oral Reading Fluency Words Correct – but has a much lower percentile in Accuracy – say the 43rd percentile. Many students have excellent accuracy (99-100%) so even if your child has very good accuracy, their percentile could look lower than you expect because most students are also very accurate. Rest assured, in second grade and beyond, if your student's accuracy is high – say above 96% – the percentile on accuracy is not cause for concern.

Should I Be Worried if My Student is at Risk?

The best answer we can provide is maybe. If your child is at risk or at some risk based on their DIBELS scores, there is reason to be watchful. We recommend talking with your child's teacher. Here are some things to ask about:

- The instruction your child is receiving.
- The intervention provided for students who struggle with reading.
- How they monitor students' progress in reading.
- How you can support your student's progress.

Partnering with the school is one of the best ways to ensure your student's success in reading.

My Student Failed DIBELS! What Should I Do?

Don't panic! DIBELS is an indicator of risk, but it's not a test with a grade. Put another way, students cannot "fail" DIBELS. DIBELS gives teachers information, so they know how to proceed with instruction. It can be thought of as one indicator of reading health, just like taking your student's temperature is an indicator of their physical health. If your student is "at risk" or "at some risk" that tells you and the teacher that your student needs additional or more explicit reading instruction.

Resources for Families

Big Ideas in Beginning Reading Website

<https://reading.uoregon.edu>

Before the science of reading was a movement, the Big Ideas in Beginning Reading website set the standard for sharing early literacy research. Now, after a full refresh, it's ready to serve a new generation of educators, families, and researchers.

Q & A: Benchmark Goals vs. Percentiles - Criterion and Norm

Referencing for DIBELS® 8th Edition:

<https://youtu.be/DHUb2UUoA0c?si=z8mNYioYviygJZLK>

This short video gives a basic overview of the difference between criterion referencing and norm referencing and how that relates to benchmark goals and percentiles for DIBELS®.

The Reading Rockets Website:

<https://readingrockets.org>

Reading Rockets offers a rich library of evidence-based classroom strategies to help young children become skilled readers.

Assessment

<https://www.readingrockets.org/reading-101/reading-101-learning-modules/course-modules/assessment>

This whole section of the Reading 101 Learning Module is about Assessment.

Literacy at Home

<https://www.readingrockets.org/literacy-home>

Learn more about how you can help support your child's literacy at home.

DIBELS® Tips for Families

Terminology

Assessment: A process of collecting information.

Benchmark: A standard, or point of reference, against which other similar things can be compared.

Progress Monitoring: The frequent, ongoing assessment of a student's progress toward the goals of an intervention.

Risk: The chance that a student may not be on track to meet grade level goals in reading.

Screening: Short processes to find students who need help in reading, writing, spelling, or math.

DIBELS 8th Edition Connection to Early Literacy Skills

DIBELS Measure	Grade Assessed	Big Idea	Why It's Important
Letter Naming Fluency (LNF)	Kindergarten First Grade	LNF does not assess any of the big ideas, but is used as a Rapid Automated Naming (RAN) measure	Letter Naming Fluency assesses a student's ability to say the "names" of upper and lowercase letters in the English alphabet. This skill is a strong predictor of future reading success in young children.
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF)	Kindergarten First Grade	Phonemic Awareness - the ability to recognize and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words.	This skill is a powerful predictor of future reading success. It is a skill that is typically assessed early in a child's schooling (i.e., kindergarten), but it is also used with older children who are having trouble reading.
Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF)	Kindergarten First Grade Second Grade Third Grade	Phonics - Understanding the relationship between letters and sounds, and how to use this knowledge to decode (read) and encode (spell) words.	Students who have strong phonics skills can connect individual sounds with letters and use those sounds to read and spell words.
Word Reading Fluency (WRF)	Kindergarten First Grade Second Grade Third Grade	Phonics and Fluency	Fluency bridges decoding and comprehension—when students read effortlessly, they can focus more on understanding the text.
Oral Reading Fluency (ORF)	First - Eighth Grade	Fluency - The ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with proper expression.	A fluent reader can read a passage smoothly without struggling to decode each word so that they can focus on understanding the text.
Maze	Second - Eighth Grade	Comprehension - The ability to understand, interpret, and gain meaning from written text.	Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading.