

Position Paper on Use of DIBELS Next[®] for System-Wide Accountability Decisions

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The importance of accountability in education is greater now than perhaps at any other time in history. Accountability refers to the systematic collection, analysis, reporting, and use of valid and reliable information for making decisions regarding how effectively a system is educating all of its students, including those from low-income families, those with disabilities, and those who are English learners. While purposes of accountability may vary, schools are increasingly being held responsible for student achievement and are required to demonstrate that all students are benefiting from adopted instructional programs and/or curricula. Although such requirements may ultimately be a benefit to schools, many states continue to struggle to find ways to effectively document student progress and track development toward important outcomes.

There has been ongoing discussion at many levels about using DIBELS[®] data as part of system-wide accountability decisions. Accountability decisions may be considered “high-stakes” decisions that have substantial consequences for schools including rewards for improving performance, sanctions for low performance, teacher evaluation, and continuation of grant funding. We are concerned that the use of DIBELS Next data for high-stakes decisions could lead to its misuse and compromise instructional practices. Some practices we have seen and find alarming, for example, include “teaching the test” in ways that raise test scores but do not focus on the needs of students or promote broader learning of critical skills. Also, since DIBELS Next is generally available to anyone, it is possible, though strongly discouraged, that test forms could be practiced prior to the assessment. Linking DIBELS Next test results to high-stakes decisions such as funding or employment may encourage these or other forms of misuse in test administration and scoring. Such practices defeat the intended purposes of DIBELS and likely result in invalid scores that do not accurately represent the skill level of the student or group

of students. If scores do not accurately represent student skill, then the student(s) may not be identified to receive necessary additional instructional support. This paper focuses on a discussion of the appropriate uses of DIBELS and DIBELS data with respect to accountability decisions at the systems level. Best practices in the use of DIBELS data at the systems level will be described for both formative assessment and summative evaluation.

Formative Assessment

The DIBELS measures are brief and efficient indicators of key early literacy skills that are predictive of future reading achievement. These measures were initially designed to be used in a formative manner at the individual student level to reliably identify students who are experiencing difficulty in the acquisition of basic early literacy skills, so that they can be provided with additional instructional support to prevent the occurrence of later reading difficulties. The DIBELS measures are also used to monitor student progress to determine the effectiveness of the instructional support being provided and help educators make decisions about when to make changes to maximize student learning and growth.

When aggregated, DIBELS data provide a broad snapshot of general program functioning and, as such, are an *indicator* of system-wide successes and needs. At a systems level, administrators can examine DIBELS Next results across all students within a class, a grade level, a school, or a district to identify the percentage of students who are on track, as well as the percentage of students who are making adequate progress toward benchmark goals. Aggregation of DIBELS Next data at the systems level provides information that may be used to examine the effectiveness of the instructional supports within the school-wide system to help determine when changes should be made. When used at the system level, as with decision making for individual students, DIBELS Next data should be used *formatively* to *identify need for support* at a class, school, or district level. Instructional supports may include aspects of the system such as:

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- a. Curricula and programs used in the school including both the core reading program and any supplemental materials or interventions
 - b. Fidelity of implementation of curricula/instructional programs
 - c. Time allocated for instruction or intervention
 - d. Instructional grouping
 - e. Content and delivery model for professional development

Similar to formative assessment of individual students, systems-level DIBELS Next data are designed to be used by educators to improve the instructional programs and interventions that are in place in their schools. In this way, systems-level DIBELS Next data are helpful in evaluating overall effectiveness of support across a school year and mobilizing resources to improve programs at the systems level.

Summative Evaluation

Recent developments in the area of teacher and principal evaluation have led educators to ask the authors of DIBELS Next at Dynamic Measurement Group (DMG) about the use of DIBELS Next for teacher accountability. Schools that rely on DIBELS Next and that are now required to provide teacher-evaluation information based on their formative reading assessment data may wish to have a measure with the reliability, validity, and utility of DIBELS. Thus, DMG has developed and tested procedures that allow for the examination of student growth over time in a summative fashion in a manner that addresses the concerns we have noted in two important ways:

1. *Protective Procedures.* Administrators at the district level agree to ensure that (a) the DIBELS Next measures are administered by a well-trained assessor, (b) assessment fidelity is periodically checked, (c) end-of-year benchmark testing is conducted by someone other than the student's teacher whenever possible, and (d) using assessment materials for practice is prohibited and instances of such are monitored. These procedures increase confidence that the use of DIBELS Next was fair and consistently implemented.
2. *Summative Growth Analysis.* The DIBELS Next Summative Growth Report¹ provides an evaluation of growth over time, compared to other students with the **same level of initial skills**. As such, teachers will not have an unfair disadvantage from having students

with very low initial skills because their growth will be compared to others with the same initial skill level. Similarly, students who start the year above the benchmark will not give teachers an unfair advantage because their growth will be compared to other students who started the year with the same high scores.

Use of the Summative Growth Report

The DIBELS Next Summative Growth Report is intended to be used as one indicator of student growth within a comprehensive teacher-evaluation and accountability program. These data are not intended to provide a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of a program that need to be considered when making high-stakes decisions. Use of any single indicator of competence to make important high-stakes decisions, such as teacher evaluation or funding, is inconsistent with professional standards for educational testing (AERA, APA, NCME, 2014). The importance of using other relevant information, including multiple forms of assessment, and viewing assessment results within the context of the school cannot be overstated. Regardless of the method used for evaluation, no single element can completely isolate a teacher's impact on a student's test scores.

The DIBELS Next Summative Growth Report provides one piece of information focused on student growth in literacy skills. While this information is valuable and important, there are other important pieces of information to consider in a system of educator effectiveness. Such a system should take into account the full range of what teachers do and the context in which teachers teach (Measures of Effective Teaching Project, 2010). The primary goal of any educational evaluation system should be to improve educational outcomes. As such, an evaluation system should be built with the intention of improving not only individual practice, but the overall system of teaching and educational leadership within schools (Reform Support Network, 2011).

Teacher Evaluation Considerations

The DIBELS Next Summative Growth Report should be considered a tool for professional conversations. Student progress is one piece of information that informs a conversation about evaluating teacher effectiveness. In addition to teacher-related factors (e.g., fidelity of core program implementation), student reading progress is impacted by other factors, including those related to the following: (a) the student (e.g., attendance); (b) the school system (e.g., available instructional resources and support);

¹The Summative Growth Report is available from DIBELSnet® (<https://dibels.net/>) and mCLASS®. For details regarding the procedures for using the Summative Growth Report, please see the *DIBELS Next Summative Growth Report: Implementation Guide*.

and (c) home and community (e.g., mobility). Additional data from other sources, as well as data collected over more than one year, will provide a fuller picture for discussion and decision making.

Important considerations when reviewing student growth data in the context of accountability decisions include the following:

- Resources available to the district, school, and teacher (e.g., professional development, materials, time)
- Home and community resources and support for instruction
- Student performance in subjects other than reading
- The instructional context through school-wide data review (e.g., percent of students At or Above Benchmark in each grade)
- Mobility of the student population
- Teacher narrative that can be used to frame the discussion
- Multiple years of data

Recommendations

We support the need for accountability and the use of multiple measures of student and school achievement and success for making decisions that may have serious consequences for teachers and schools. The greatest value in using

DIBELS is found in its use as a formative assessment to help teachers and administrators to identify students that need additional support and to evaluate the effectiveness of that support for the purpose of modifying that support, whether at the individual student level or at the school-wide system level. We recommend the following practices related to the use of DIBELS Next data as one piece of data within an accountability and/or evaluation system:

- a. Establishment of system-wide goals and alignment with DIBELS Next goals
- b. Adequate training on administration, scoring, and interpretation of DIBELS Next data
- c. Ongoing monitoring of fidelity of test administration and scoring
- d. Collection of formative data on program implementation and alterable variables that impact student success
- e. Ongoing and integrated professional development on the critical early literacy skills, instruction/intervention practices, and interpretation and use of data.

Questions?

Visit our website at <https://dibels.org> or contact us at info@dibels.org.