

Position Paper on “The Truth About DIBELS”

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Ken Goodman and his associates have recently published a book called *The Truth about DIBELS* which, unfortunately, contains numerous errors based on misuses

of and misconceptions about this assessment tool. Having received multiple requests from school district and State Department of Education personnel from around the United States for a response to this publication, we have decided to offer the following comments. Our comments must be brief and cannot provide an exhaustive rebuttal of the errors in the Goodman book but are designed to address the overarching misuses, misconceptions, and inaccuracies that are presented in the publication. A series of technical reports on DIBELS are available from <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>. In addition, revisions are being made to the current DIBELS Administration and Scoring Manual to provide more detailed information regarding the conceptual foundations and technical adequacy of the measures.

Misuses

A large proportion of what is reported in the publication reflects what we would characterize as gross educational *misuses* of DIBELS – or of any educational assessment. An example of a misuse of the test is the allegation that the DIBELS assessment has contributed to a narrowing of the curriculum and that teachers are teaching to the test. An example of a misuse of the data is grade retention and/or grading of students based on DIBELS results.

The first misuse, teaching to the test, is related to a misunderstanding about the type of measurement that DIBELS represents. DIBELS were developed to be economical and efficient *indicators* of a student's progress toward achieving a general outcome. In much the same way as an individual's temperature or blood pressure is an indicator of general health and well-being, predictive measures in the area of education can be used to indicate

a child's progress toward an important and meaningful outcome (in this case, reading accurately and fluently to get meaning from what is read). The powerful predictive validity of the measures does *not* mean that their content should become the focus of our instruction. Each DIBELS indicator represents a broader sequence of skills and concepts to be taught. As pointed out by Kaminski and Good (1996), “While the DIBELS measures may provide an indicator of a child's acquisition of early literacy skills, teachers should not limit instruction to only those skills that are measured by DIBELS. Teachers should provide a broad range of experiences with print as well as instruction in all of the skills that are known to be facilitative of early reading.” For an example of the sequence of skills related to and leading to the goals, please see the Curriculum Maps at <http://reading.uoregon.edu/>. DIBELS measures are designed to be brief so that more teacher time is available for instruction.

The second misuse, the use of data to make high-stakes decisions, also reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of the measures. DIBELS were designed to be used in a formative manner to identify children experiencing difficulty in the acquisition of basic early literacy skills, in order to provide support early and prevent the occurrence of later reading difficulties. As part of the formative assessment process, DIBELS were designed to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions for those children receiving support in order to make changes when necessary to maximize student learning and growth. It has never been the intention of the developers of DIBELS that the data be used to track or label students, or to grade students or make decisions about retention. Please see the authors' position papers on *Use of DIBELS for System-Wide Accountability Decisions* and *Use of DIBELS for High Stakes Decisions for Children* (available from <http://www.dibels.org/>) for more information on this topic.

Misconceptions

Many of what we would agree are misuses of DIBELS are due to misconceptions about the measures and confusion about the purposes of different kinds of assessments in reading education. These misunderstandings are particularly evident when considering the underlying concepts related to General Outcome Measures and the type of decisions that DIBELS are intended to facilitate. One such example of these misconceptions is the purported emphasis on “speed” in teachers’ use of the DIBELS measures.

Because all DIBELS measures are timed, educators may assume that the emphasis of the measures is simply on speed of performance. In actuality, DIBELS measures are timed for two reasons. The first reason is that fluency in early literacy is important. A child who performs a task fluently, that is, both accurately *and* quickly, has learned the skill to mastery, is automatic in performing the underlying skills and is much more able to remember, maintain, and apply the skill than a child who has not achieved mastery. Fluency of the component early literacy skills during the early school years provides a foundation upon which later skills are built. Moreover, fluency in oral reading is the gateway to comprehension. Research on oral reading fluency clearly shows that, in general, children who read fluently are more likely to comprehend what they read (see, for example, the article by Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, in the May 2005 issue of *The Reading Teacher*).

The second reason for timed measures is related to the notion of DIBELS as *indicators*, or General Outcome Measures. To monitor progress efficiently toward important outcomes (the intended use of DIBELS), fluency-based scores are used because they are more sensitive to small changes in growth and development of skills over relatively short periods of time (e.g., one week). For all timed measures, the timing is as unobtrusive as possible. A silent count-down timer is used and no attention or emphasis is given to the timing aspect of the assessment. Most students are not even aware that timing is occurring. Students are never told to read as fast as possible; the DIBELS directions clearly state to “do your *best* reading.” For more information on other misconceptions about DIBELS measures, please see

the monograph *Challenging the Myths About DIBELS* available from <http://www.dibels.org/>.

Inaccuracies

Some statements in the publication are presented as if they are research-based when, in fact, they are opinions that are not based on facts. For example, the statement that DIBELS lack predictive validity is inaccurate. DIBELS have adequate predictive validity for screening and progress monitoring decisions. Performance on the DIBELS measures is described relative to a criterion, called a benchmark goal. This goal is an empirically derived cut point where the odds are 80-100% in the child’s favor of reaching the next benchmark goal. For a report on the research underlying the decision rules and benchmark goals, see Technical Report #11, *Summary of Decision Rules for Intensive, Strategic, and Benchmark Instructional Recommendations in Kindergarten Through Third Grade*, available from <http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>.

Of course, the test offers no guarantees—continued good instruction is required for students who meet that goal in order for them to stay on track. On a related note, the prediction for students falling significantly below the benchmark goal (e.g. students who are identified on a screening measure as needing intensive instructional support) may be *ruined* by providing early, effective instruction. This practice is, in fact, one of the goals of DIBELS—to ruin the predictions of previous research and get all children on track to becoming better readers.

Summary

We share concern about potential misuses of DIBELS. In hundreds of schools across the United States, DIBELS have contributed to positive outcomes for teachers and children. As educators who care about children, we need to be vigilant about misuses of DIBELS and similar misuses of *any* assessment we use. The primary questions you may want to ask to determine the usefulness of DIBELS for your school or district are: Are DIBELS being implemented appropriately for the purposes for which they were intended? Are teachers teaching the core components of reading broadly? Are DIBELS being administered and scored reliably? Are DIBELS and the instructional decisions informed by DIBELS helping to improve reading outcomes for students in your school?