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New York, NY

Like July, the data from the August 20-day term at Drake Bennett Summer Schools (offering 20 hours of multisensory literacy remediation as part of the 200 hour program) evidences almost all students demonstrating a rate of improvement in their reading that surpasses the national norm. It is not enough for struggling readers to simply improve: that leaves them perpetually behind, like the caboose on a fast-moving train. They must attain and demonstrate an accelerated rate of progress in order to close the gap between themselves and their peers who are reading on grade level.

As pre-readers, kindergarteners are assessed only with the Test of Early Literacy, which measures essential reading skills: letter-name fluency, letter-sound fluency, phoneme segmentation fluency (phonemic awareness,) and non-word fluency (the ability to sound out and read simple, 3-letter, closed-syllables.) While each skill is foundational, there is a progression such that each subtest moves a step closer to actual reading. Of the 3 kindergarteners, one student's rate of improvement (ROI) of 2.5 on the non-word fluency (NWF) subtest, the subtest closest to reading, enabled him to move from the 8th to the 22nd percentile of kindergarteners. The other 2 students demonstrated continued difficulty with NWF, but did show growth on other measures. For example, the student with the ROI of 1.75 on phoneme segmentation moved from the 20th to 29th percentile on that skill, and the student with the ROI of 2.5 on LSF moved from the 13th to 30th percentile on that skill. A goal for the program for next year would be to see whether students like these last two can be supported in making even greater shifts. It is also important to recognize that the summer is short, there are no magic bullets, and many students need to continue throughout the school year the essential work they began over the summer.

Although the TEL is a strong measure of reading sub-skills, the best way to measure a child's reading ability is with text reading. Therefore, the curriculum based material-reading test (CBM-R) is the stronger measure and the one that has priority beginning in first grade. Three first graders demonstrated strong ROIs on the CBM-R. Of the three remaining children, one refused to read, one had a negative ROI, and one child went from not having a measurable score (i.e., less than ten words read correctly) to being able to read 17 words/minute. Two of these students demonstrated very strong ROIs on the NWF subtest. The child who refused to read showed strong improvement on the phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF) subtest. Drake Bennett could still challenge itself further by asking what else could be done to support these students.

All six second graders demonstrated ROIs that surpassed the expected ROI for their ability-matched peers. Three students, those who read 97 and 106 words per minute, are well within average range (41st and 50th percentiles.) The other three made very good progress, but began so far behind that will need ongoing intervention to move into average range.

Three of the four third graders demonstrated high ROIs. One began as a “high flyer” and remained so, moving from the 74th to 90th percentile. This is a student who is clearly for the deeper work on morphology (roots, prefixes and suffixes,) vocabulary and grammar that the program offers. Two students moved into average range (43rd and 44th percentile.) One student’s performance on the CBM-R went down, which bears further examination; it may be worth noting that this student missed five of the twenty days of instruction. This student’s performance on the NWF subtest was exceptional and changed significantly over the course of the month. It seemed to this examiner that this student seemed to derive confidence from mastering specific skills and would benefit from working with decodable text and continuing to use the step-wise approach that Drake Bennett employs while being supported in developing strategies for attacking non-controlled text.

Of the two fourth graders, one demonstrated solid growth and moved from the 9th to 21st percentile. This student should continue to receive support over the school year to move into average range. The other fourth grader did not demonstrate improvement in his CBM-R but did show growth in her TEL subtest scores.

Of the three fifth graders, one did quite well, moving from the 79th to 92nd percentile. The other two students are worth closer examination. Both are identified as children with severe dyslexia. One made modest progress in his CBM-R score and showed negative growth in his NWF subtest. This is a case where one must look beyond the numbers. The significant change that is not reflected numerically is that in reading the non-words, this student moved from sounding out each letter individually to blending and reading each non-word as a whole unit, albeit slowly. That is an achievement that should be celebrated. The second student was assessed using a first grade CBM-R passage, did demonstrate growth and also improved in his NWF.

The sixth grader, with a commendable ROI of 3.75, moved from the 9th to the 16th percentile, which demonstrates in a quite glaring manner, the kind of intensive and sustained work that lies ahead for so many struggling, delayed readers.

I believe the data show that for the most dyslexic students, summer is a time of barely staying afloat and minimal progress. For many struggling students, Drake Bennett’s summer program may provide an essential first step, a kick-start on a much longer path to full remediation. For a few, Drake Bennett provides a much-needed antidote to what may have been an inadequate educational program or curriculum, re-rights the ship and helps them set sail into reading.

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