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New York, NY

In June of this year I was retained by Drake Bennett Summer Schools to administer before and after assessments of their summer school students. I have no other commercial relationship with Drake Bennett, and have done all of the testing myself, without involvement from Drake Bennett staff.

Reading is fundamental. There is no skill more central to success in our current society. Yet we are all painfully aware of the high numbers of children who are struggling to demonstrate basic reading proficiency, as measured by state and local assessments, and the long-term challenges for those individuals as well as for our society as a whole. The “reading wars” with advocates of a “whole language” approach on one side and a phonics-based approach on the other, rage on as educators and politicians argue about the best approach to teaching reading, in spite of the findings of the National Reading Panel which outlined the five major components of reading instruction. These are: phonemic awareness (recognizing and manipulating sounds in words); phonics (attaching sounds to letters); fluency (reading accurately and smoothly); vocabulary; and text comprehension. And, as “the proof is in the pudding,” a reading program is only as good as the reading success of the children it instructs. So programs have to demonstrate their worth. Drake Bennett Summer School employs a curriculum that meets the requirements of the National Reading Panel. Furthermore, its students demonstrate progress as measured by Aimsweb: the leading progress monitoring tool used today.

I employed two of Aimsweb’s assessment tools: the Test of Early Literacy (TEL) for children in grades K and 1 (and older children who are struggling readers) and Reading-Curriculum Based Measurement (R-CBM). Assessment is done through one-minute, timed tasks. The TEL is comprised of four skill-based assessments that measure mastery of early reading measures: Letter Name Fluency; Letter Sound Fluency; Phoneme Segmentation Fluency; and Nonsense Word Fluency. The R-CBM is comprised of brief, grade-level reading passages. R-CBM is a particularly powerful measure that uses oral reading fluency as an indicator of global reading proficiency. Just as a doctor measures your temperature, weight, and blood pressure to monitor your overall health, R-CBM is a proven, accurate measure of reading ability. Furthermore, Aimsweb national norms data now comprises the results from over 30,000 students per grade, nationwide.

Two notes before looking at the Drake Bennett data: First, any reference to a child’s grade is based on the grade they last completed. This is for two reasons. First, there is no “summer” Aimsweb data. So all children’s scores were compared to scores of children from the spring of the school year just completed. Second, some of their students are at risk of being held back in last year’s grade, so it is not clear what grade they will be in come fall. Second, whenever possible, children were tested on grade-level reading passages. If they were unable to read a sentence from a grade-level passage (>10 words correct), they were given an easier passage.

Let's take a look at the results from pre- and post-testing of the Drake Bennett July students. "Expected ROI (rate of improvement)" is the demonstrated ROI per week from students nationwide at the same percentile. "Actual ROI" is the performance of the Drake Bennett student. Looking at the kindergarteners, you can see that kindergarteners in general progress at the rate of about one letter/sound/per week. Nationally, children at the lower end, have lower ROIs which reflect their slower rates of improvement. At Drake Bennett in July, five of their six kindergarteners improved at a rate faster than their peers, some quite significantly so. If we focus specifically on the Nonsense Word Fluency subtest as the closest measure to actual reading, for a student like AL, her change (from 20 sounds correct to 47) moved her from the 13th percentile to the 66th percentile for kindergarteners nationwide. Meanwhile Student MA (a recent immigrant from Lebanon) moved from the 35th to 60th percentile.

Overall, the CBM-R is the most accurate measure of reading progress. Looking at their six 1st graders, three children surpassed the expected ROI for children at their level. Of the remaining three children, one made no progress, one moved from <10 words correct to exactly 10 words correct (there is no ROI for < 10) and one child was not administered the R-CBM. Two of these three children still demonstrated some progress in their TEL scores.

Looking at the 2nd and 3rd graders, four of seven children improved at a rate faster than their percentile -matched peers. As for the three children who made minimal to no progress, we do see some progress in their TEL scores, suggesting that these student's foundational skills are developing and need even more intensive work.

In the older group, 4th-6th graders, ten of twelve children really made outstanding progress, demonstrating ROIs that surpass their national peers. It is these ROIs that are necessary to close the gap between these readers and their grade-level peers. Studies show that one of the problems with traditional school-based pull-out services is that students who are, e.g., reading two years below grade level, make progress but, of course, so do their peers, and they remain reading two years below grade level. Only programs that can demonstrate higher than average rates of improvement have the potential to not just maintain these students but to raise their reading levels to the level of their grade-level peers. If students could continue this level of progress throughout the school year, they would have a chance of really catching up.

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