August 21, 2014
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 I have done all of the testing myself, without involvement from Drake Bennett staff.

Drake Bennett Summer School is a full-day summer school for elementary grade students. Students are grouped homogeneously for Orton-Gillingham based reading instruction or enrichment (direct instruction in affixes and Latin roots along with sentence-level comprehension strategies) for 60 minutes, five days/week for four weeks. In addition, students are grouped heterogeneously for an additional daily period of drama during which they also work on literacy skills. All students attend daily classes in math, science, art, sports, and dance. Relatively strong math students receive instruction in geography instead of math.

Each student's reading level is assessed at the beginning and end of the month using two Aimsweb tools: the Test of Early Literacy (TEL) 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. Due to the high number of students at Drake Bennett with dyslexia, all students are administered the TEL even though it is normed only on students in grade K and 1. Given the short duration of the program, this permits us to see if students make progress in basic reading subskills apart from text reading.

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. Aimsweb national norms data comprises the results from over 30,000 students per grade, nationwide. Norms include both ROI (rate of improvement expressed as number of words/week) and percentile ranks. As expected, nationally, children at the lower end have lower ROIs which reflects their slower rates of improvement. As a rule of thumb, children in grade 1 at the 50th and 75th %ile increase their reading rate by 1.5 and 1.8 words/week, respectively. Children in grades 2 through 5, at both the 50th and 75th %ile, increase their reading rate by about 1 word/week.

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. There is no "summer" Aimsweb data. So all Drake Bennett children's scores were compared to scores of children from late spring of the school year just completed. In addition, some of the Drake Bennett 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.

In July 2014, of the 3 kindergarten students, one left for a family trip before post-testing, one showed no change in his reading, and one improved quite significantly, demonstrating an ROI of 5.5 on Nonsense Word Fluency and an ROI of 4 on CBM-R.

Overall, the CBM-R is the most accurate measure of reading progress. Looking at the seven 1st graders, two children surpassed the expected ROI for children at their level, and increased their reading rate by 3 and 4.25 words/week. The remaining five children showed no improvement in their text reading; however 4 of those 5 demonstrated significant improvement in their TEL scores and especially their Nonword Reading Fluency.

Thirteen 2nd graders participated in the July program; however, 4 were not present for post-testing. Of the remaining 9 students, 7 improved at a faster rate than national peers, some quite significantly so with ROIs of 5, 6, 7.25 and 8.25. Of the remaining two children who made minimal to no progress in their text reading, both demonstrated tremendous improvement in their Nonword Fluency suggesting that these student's foundational skills are developing and need even more intensive work.

Four 3rd graders were present for post-testing. Three demonstrated ROIs that outpaced their expected rate. The fourth demonstrated an ROI of 1, but demonstrated excellent improvement in Nonword Fluency. Each of the eight 4th and 5th graders earned ROIs that outpaced their national peers, improving by anywhere from an additional 2-7 words/week.

High ROIs are necessary to advance slow readers. According to Aimsweb, performance at the 45th %ile on national norms indicates that the student is 80% likely to meet proficiency standards on a typical state test. Only programs that can demonstrate higher than average rates of improvement have the potential to not just maintain struggling 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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