

September 12, 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 August 2014, there were 5 kindergartens with very different profiles. One student performed below the 2nd percentile and demonstrated no growth over the course of the month. Another student was absent for 25% of the month and demonstrated negative growth on the Nonword Reading Fluency. A third student showed strong improvement in Phoneme Segmentation Fluency but not in Nonword Reading Fluency. The fourth student showed significant progress in all four measures of the Test of Early Literacy. The fifth student is already a fluent reader who, while not performing well on the TEL, read 130 words per minute on the kindergarten level passage (no national norms until first grade.)

Overall, the CBM-R is the most accurate measure of reading progress. Looking at the three 1st graders, all three demonstrated strong improvement in their Test of Early Literacy scores. One showed strong growth in his CBM-R score, earning an ROI of 5.0. The second student demonstrated modest improvement in his ROI, the third student none. However, this third student also demonstrated a great deal of anxiety during testing and during initial testing was accompanied by the speech/language pathologist who provided emotional support.

Six 2nd graders participated in the August program. All six students demonstrated ROIs greater than the national average for their reading level. Three of those students earned an ROI more than 3x the national average, two earned an ROI of more than 2x the national average and one student earned an ROI 1.5 times the national average for his reading level.

Six third graders participated in the August session. Five of them demonstrated ROIs more than three times the national average for their reading level. One student demonstrated slight growth. Similarly, three of the five fourth graders showed strong growth. One student demonstrated growth that surpassed the national average for his reading level but remained below the first percentile, and one student demonstrated slight growth. Both fifth grade students earned ROIs that surpassed the national norms; one in particular also achieved a high ROI on the Nonword Fluency subtest of the Test of Early Literacy and moved from below the 2nd percentile in reading to the 9th percentile.

High ROIs are necessary to advance slow readers. According to Aimsweb, performance at the 45th percentile 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. In the August session, six students showed an increase in reading of more than 15 percentage points in comparison to grade level peers, three increased more than 10 percentage points and two students increased more than 5 percentage points. 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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