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### LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

In the December issue of the ORACLE, I made a request for people to submit comments, letters, insights, helpful hints or any research people might have around the use of DIBELS for this publication from the Oregon Reading Association. I received comments immediately that expressed a wide range of opinions about DIBELS.

I have pulled together a collection of the information I received from around the State. I have in some places listed the school district where people work. It is my assumption that the opinions stated were personal opinions and do not necessarily represent their districts official opinion.

As you read through the comments be sure to consider reading the references suggested by the people that took the time to respond. I found the references quite interesting. I have listed some references that were sent to me by a number of people. It is once again a variety of opinions.

Sincerely,  
Dwayne Smith  
Oregon Reading Association  
Advocate Editor  
email: DeWayne\_Smith@beavton.k12.or.us

### THE NOT OFFICIAL WEBSITE FOR DIBELS

<http://vsse.net/dibels/user/register>

I had this site address sent to me. The site is very critical of DIBELS. It states numerous times it is not the official site.

It is called The Vermont Society for the Study of Education. They state that they have recently published the nation's first critical look at DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) titled, *Examining DIBELS: What it is and What it Does*.

### DIBELS

*(Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) has gained national recognition as an early literacy assessment tool.*

*DIBELS was developed by researchers at the University of Oregon and is now widely used in many states, including Oregon.*

*As with any assessment tool, DIBELS has won both praise and criticism from educators.*

### Reference to Ken Goodman

*I had numerous references to an article that Ken Goodman wrote for Language Magazine. The reference often came with an email like the one from Alan deMeurers:*

Hi Dwayne,

This article by Ken Goodman pretty much covers my feelings over the DIBELS debate!

Alan De Meurers  
Keizer, OR.

*Alan sent me a copy of Goodman's article from Language Magazine, December 2005 V5: 1 pp24-27 titled DIBELS: The Perfect Literacy Test.*

*Here is the opening paragraph by Goodman:*

*"If Katrina came close to being the perfect storm – in the awful sense of the storm that had all the attributes to do the most harm to the lives of those whose destructive power and irresistible forces it touched – then there is a perfect literacy test sweeping through American Schools and doing the maximum amount of damage to the lives of those it touches."*

*An email from Jo Ann in the Hood River School District simply wrote: "Please refer to the article "The Perfect Literacy Test" in the December 2005 issue of Language Magazine at*

[www.languagemagazine.com](http://www.languagemagazine.com)

## *A More Formal Response*

*From the University of Oregon I received a more formal article from Gerald Tindal, Paul Yovanoff, and Julie Alonzo.*

### **DIBELS IN THE CONTEXT OF REFORM AND THE MEASUREMENT OF READING**

*Gerald Tindal, Paul Yovanoff, and Julie Alonzo, University of Oregon*

The omnipresence of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) in our nation's schools can be attributed to two significant events. First, this measurement protocol for reading was derived from 25 years of curriculum-based measurement (CBM) research originally begun at the University of Minnesota under the direction of Dr. Stanley Deno. During this interval, considerable technical work was completed to develop a system for monitoring students' performance so that it was both sensitive to incremental progress and capable of frequent administration under the direct control of the teacher. DIBELS was able to capitalize on these features by emphasizing critical skills in learning to read such as phonemic awareness with initial sounds; the alphabetic principles of letter names, segmentation, nonsense word reading; the fluency of oral reading; and the comprehension of word use and retelling. *N.B.* These areas have been emphasized in the National Reading Panel. The second critical event was the report from the Reading First Assessment Committee in 2002 in which very few standardized published instruments were found to be technically adequate for making decisions such as screening, diagnosing, placing in programs, monitoring progress, or evaluating programs. When this committee cross-walked the areas of reading with these decisions to be made and superimposed requirements of reliability and validity data, very few instruments passed the test. DIBELS was one that appeared adequate for most of these decisions, particularly when the criteria were relaxed to allow progress monitoring to be based on a minimum of three data points. In summary, the combination of long-term groundwork to develop direct reading measures using the CBM paradigm and federal legislation requiring instruments that were technically adequate provided the perfect platform for DIBELS to launch. Questions can then be asked about effects, benefits, and limitations.

Certainly, the use of DIBELS in our schools has provided teachers and building teams a uniform focus, accessible reports of student performance, and common language. In the early grades, teachers can now discuss student outcomes with a frame of reference

that provides continuity over time, across grades, and in relation to curriculum and instruction. Another advantage is the early warning signs provided by the data: Teachers now can intervene in a more timely fashion, before it is too late. These two features also present a synergistic effect: With teacher teams speaking in a common language and with early warning signs, it is possible to mount school-wide interventions such as re-scheduling, double-dose reading, and teacher pull-in programs. These more large-scale interventions represent a level of effort that far exceeds tweaking the curriculum in the classroom and probably are not as available without both the common language and improved outcomes. Finally, DIBELS provides early data (predictive correlations) on achievement of standards. In the current standards-driven reforms, most statewide tests begin in grade three. Yet, without a system-wide effort before grade three, achievement of such standards is unlikely to be successful. With DIBELS, it is more likely to develop a trajectory that eventually becomes passed onto a successful launch in large-scale testing.

However, three current limitations also can be seen in DIBELS as it presently is employed. These limitations actually are less about its use and more about the instrument and its scaling properties. First, DIBELS is primarily a screening instrument and only secondarily a progress-monitoring instrument. The reason for making this argument is that alternate forms have not been developed using the statistical approaches widely employed in most modern-day sophisticated assessment development efforts. In the current model of test development for most large-scale measures, Item Response Theory (IRT) (or similar procedures for estimating item characteristics and form equating) would be used to ensure that scores obtained from alternate forms are statistically comparable. DIBELS has only provided an analog of such data (using correlations and group differences between forms), analyses that are not really adequate for resolving the issue. Second, DIBELS is not diagnostic other than what teachers can clinically use on their own and informally. This issue is related to the first point: Without knowing the item

*(continued on facing page)*

## Another Point of View

*Allen Koshewa from Reynolds School District wrote:*

Dewayne,

Here is a response to your DIBELS survey.

A strong correlation between phonemic awareness and other reading skills/strategies has been widely established. Unfortunately, the creators of DIBELS seem to have mistaken that relationship for causation, and the conceptual framework for DIBELS fails to either adequately acknowledge the developmental nature of phonemic awareness or the role of authentic writing in promoting it.

Scott Paris, in a 2004 Reading Research Quarterly article, eloquently posits that phonemic awareness, unlike other aspects of reading development, is a “constrained variable” that is prominent as a predictor of reading ability only in the early years of reading development, and thus should not be used as a long-term predictor of reading skill.

Many proponents of DIBELS pooh-pooh

the value of writing as an indicators of PA levels, despite Kamii and Manning’s excellent research (“Phonemic Awareness and Beginning Reading and Writing” Journal of Research in Childhood Education, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2002) that shows a strong correlation between oral segmentation and a child’s level of writing. This important work implies the importance of writing instruction and positive support for children’s approximations in reading and writing. It also suggests that children’s writing may provide more information about their phonemic awareness than DIBELS.

My opinion? DIBELS is being reified over non-commercial sources of assessment and has become part and parcel of the phonics-first, phonics-only movement. For that reason alone it should be regarded with suspicion.

Allen Koshewa

*More about...*

### **DIBELS IN THE CONTEXT OF REFORM AND THE MEASUREMENT OF READING**

*(continued from facing page)*

characteristics and without knowing how these items interact with individual students of differing abilities, it is not possible to make certain statements about specific skills (on individual items). For example, the implications are drastically different if low skill students answer a difficult item incorrectly than if they answer easy items incorrectly. With IRT, it is possible to locate items and students on the same scale to make a psychometrically sound judgment about performance. Finally, DIBELS can only measure progress in an immediate manner without much reach (within grades or measures not across grades). Because the instrument is comprised of several individual measures, each with its own (raw) scale score, it is not possible to combine them into a meaningful trajectory over years. For example, as students improve on letter

names and move to letter sounds, continuing the former measure makes little sense, as a ceiling effect is soon reached. The same can be said of other measures (phonemic awareness with initial sounds being transferred to phonics skills of nonsense word reading).

Each measure functions on its own scale and relates in an analog manner to the other measures.

In summary, DIBELS represents an excellent, first generation measure for helping teachers focus instruction and work together in developing successful interventions. It provides very useful skill information that teachers can use immediately.

As a second generation instrument, it may be important to address issues of scaling to advance the field by providing systems data for evaluating progress monitoring or program evaluation.

## A Director of School Improvement Responds

*Rinda Montgomery wrote:*

Dear Dewayne:

I see in the winter edition of the ORAcle from the Oregon Reading Association that the editors are looking for information from current DIBELS users. I am currently directing a pilot project with the state of Oregon made possible initially by a generous grant from the Eola Hills Education Fund for a DIBELS with Handhelds project in north central Oregon. I have eleven elementary schools in four counties currently using DIBELS with Palm handheld software called "Mclass" from Wireless Generation which enables the tests to be administered using the handheld computers, the data transferred automatically (no data transfer errors as happens when people manually score test booklets and enter scores), and the results posted securely online for immediate access by the teacher and administrator.

The pilot project started last January with just a few sites. As we eased in the additional sites, I've had the opportunity to streamline the training and delivery model, fine tune the testing process, and provide follow-up training to sites, which, now faced with immediate feedback on skill gaps, then needed useful intervention options to address those gaps.

### A Reading Coach Responds

*I also received short emails from people like Annie Tabshy, a reading coach in Portland Public Schools. Tabshy wrote:*

Hello Dewayne,

We have been using DIBELS for the past four years. It is a useful tool to be used as a predictor of student success and monitoring progress. I find that the frequent progress monitoring really helps teachers focus on specific areas of deficits in children's reading. Our teachers use this information to meet the needs of each of their students.

Annie Tabshy  
Boise Eliot Reading Coach

As you might guess, these are rural schools using cutting-edge technology quite successfully. All administrators, teachers k-6, paraprofessionals, and special services personnel have been trained and are involved in testing, data trending, and intervention activities. Perhaps one of the best pieces of information I can give you is a quote from one of our teachers:

HHHHOOOWWDDDDYYY!

Guess what...

Two of my students that were way below the starting point in ORF for second grade were monitored today. One has gone from 40 wpm to 88 wpm! The other has moved from 35 wpm to 76 wpm! For a goal of 90 by the end of the year... these two have made significant, awesome progress. CHEER! Teaching to their weak areas has really paid off.

The computer sync station is working great.

Hope your day is wonderful!

Shirley

Please let me know if you would like further information about our project.

Sincerely

Rinda Montgomery Conwell  
Director of School Improvement  
North Central Education Service District  
Condon, Oregon



## Many People Responded with References

*Dr. Carol Lauritzen from Eastern Oregon University responded with a list of references:*

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# Mark Your Calendar

*Set aside these upcoming dates  
for some very exciting and  
informative ORA and IRA events!*

August 3 - 4, 2006 Oregon Literacy Conference, Linfield College, McMinnville, OR  
*Presented by the Oregon Reading Association, the Oregon Library  
Association and the Oregon Educational Media Association*

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February 9 - 10, 2007 ORA Annual State Conference, Doubletree Inn, Portland, OR  
*"Literacy Lights the Way"*

— *Check the ORA Website for More Information* —  
**<http://oregonread.org>**

**And, while you're at it, don't forget to add the dates  
and times of your local council meetings... you're always welcome there!**



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