

What's New In Professional Development

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This year, as part of its commitment to early literacy, the District has retooled professional development for principals and teachers. The objective is to make sure that they know the best strategies and can use the available literacy assessment tools – the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA), DIBELS, and AIMSweb. Each sheds light on different issues children may have at different stages of their development, but teachers must be trained to use them properly.

If a child is having difficulty, it is crucial to be able to accurately diagnose why, said Diane Castelbuono, the District's director of early childhood programs.

"Reading is a very individual process," she said. "You could have 30 kids not learning to read for 30 different reasons."

Some children have trouble with letters and sounds, but can comprehend what the story is about. Others have the opposite problem – they can decode, but don't understand what they are reading.

"It is hard to tell if a child is learning disabled or hasn't been read to," Castelbuono said. "Learning to talk is

natural, learning to read is not natural. All kinds of barriers come up."

Donyall Dickey, the District's chief academic support officer, said that in December, 140 District educators were trained in using AIMSweb. The District restructured its professional development this year, scheduling early dismissals on 10 Wednesdays to make time, and many of these sessions are for early literacy.

Dickey said that teachers are being given tools addressing five main components that are key to literacy instruction: phonemic awareness (the ability to recognize the sounds that make up words), phonics (learning the relationship between letters and their sounds), vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension.

The District needs to walk a fine line between giving teachers something to work with and making them feel like they are being straitjacketed.

"We don't have a script. ... We value teachers' ability to plan and deliver quality instruction," Dickey said. "But we have to make sure that each teacher has as many tools as possible and that every student has equal access to quality early literacy instruction."