

In Teaching Literacy, Assessments Are In Real Time

Connie Langland 27 February 2015

It's a constant process – monitoring students for what has been mastered and responding to any difficulties in learning to read. PSSAs play an entirely different role.

Mentioning the term “assessment” at this time of year conjures thoughts of the PSSA, the annual state test – controversial for the amount of time that is eaten up in preparation and the pall that poor showings can cast over a school.

But when literacy experts use the term “assessment,” they're more likely to be referring to the real-time assessment tools that are now viewed as vital in efforts to ensure that children stay on track learning to read.

In the early grades, these assessments are frequent but seldom involve pencil and paper, except for showing the student's emerging abilities in writing his name or her grasp of the alphabet.

Often, the assessments are one-on-one, with the teacher or reading specialist sitting with the child in an exchange that takes just a few minutes.

What the teacher is looking for are signs that the child is becoming fluent in naming letters, is learning the sounds of letters and words and is responsive to the instruction under way.

A hallmark of these assessments is that results are immediately at hand—same day for individual students and within a few days or weeks for classes or grade levels as a whole, speeding up teacher intervention.

Unlike the PSSA, whose results come months later, they are not used to judge a school or a teacher.

“These are tools that help teachers identify where children are having difficulties and to adapt instruction,” said Diane Castelbuono, the District’s deputy chief for early childhood education. “Is the child having difficulty with certain words? Does he understand what the story is about? ... These are not high-stakes tests; they are aids to instruction.”

Early Warning Signs

Using a mix of formal and informal assessments, teachers can identify difficulties and respond to students who show signs of being at risk for failing to learn to read. If an assessment shows numerous children missing a skill, the teacher can adjust instruction to reinforce learning.

“If we find something a whole group is missing, we’ll find [a response] we can slot into the day to address that

need. If it's a small number of kids, we can do a pullout program," noted Claire Cohen, chief education officer at Belmont Charter School in West Philadelphia.

Better to intervene in a timely fashion in kindergarten than in 3rd or 4th grade. By 3rd grade, according to literacy experts, students should be reading to learn, not learning to read.

"Early intervention is critical. By the time a student reaches 3rd or 4th grade, they've lost so much ground. I call it miles on the page," said Nancy Hennessy, director of academic and professional practices at AIM Academy in Conshohocken, a private school for students with language-based learning issues.

The student who falls behind has "missed out on practice with words, development of vocabulary, acquiring background knowledge, and work with complex syntax," said Hennessy. Remediation takes longer and requires more intense intervention.

At Belmont Charter, a grade 1-8 school in West Philadelphia, and its sister school, Belmont Academy, which offers kindergarten as well as preschool to 3- and 4-year-olds, assessments come early and often.

Each child participates in an informal assessment during a visit to meet his or her teacher in the summer. By the start of school, the teacher has a good idea of the strengths and needs of her classroom as a whole. The more

common practice elsewhere is to handle this kind of diagnostic work in the opening weeks of school.

“We’re off and running the first day of school to meet the needs of students,” said Jennifer VanZandt, academic director of Belmont Academy.

Findings may influence where a child is placed. “If a child comes into 1st grade scoring far below grade level, we make sure that child is placed in a classroom that has an additional person in the room for more individualized attention,” Cohen said.

Many Varieties

Assessments can be used to:

- screen students’ reading abilities at the start of school;
- diagnose issues that impede learning how to read;
- track progress of both individual students and classrooms as a whole (so-called benchmark assessments); and
- evaluate student progress from year to year and also program effectiveness.

The purpose of the PSSAs, administered in April in grades 3-8, is to evaluate grade-level performance, including comparison with all other public schools across the state. Results become available to the schools after the school year ends – too late to affect instruction at grade level for

the students being tested.

The PSSAs “give you the big picture – how are we doing as a system in developing reading skills? It’s more of a global measure,” said Hennessy.

And here’s a drawback: If students taking the 3rd-grade test don’t do well, test results offer few clues as to why. Do the students not reaching proficiency lack the skills to even read the text – word recognition – or are they struggling with meaning?

“That’s why it’s very important early on to be looking at all these facets of reading efficiency,” said Hennessy, an expert in dyslexia and other reading issues.

Cohen said she finds some value to the PSSAs. “We can see how our kids are doing compared with students across Philadelphia and across the state,” she said. “But we don’t get the results for a long time, and my students have moved on to a different grade by then.”

Belmont teachers use two commercially developed standardized tests, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and AIMSweb, an assessment that helps teacher determine how fluent a young child is in naming letters and recognizing the sounds of oral English. AIM Academy also uses AIMSweb.

District teachers rely on the DRA, which is given three times a year, and DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic

Early Literacy Skills), developed by the University of Oregon. DRA results are incorporated into each school's annual progress report, published by the District.

Some District schools use AIMSweb now; the plan, according to Castelbuono, is to roll out AIMSweb districtwide in the early grades next year. "It is meant to be a tool to help teachers, and they will need some training in how to use it and how to adapt instruction," she said. Teachers need to be efficient, and this assessment takes little time, is less disruptive to instruction, and can be used with more frequency.

Belmont's Cohen and VanZandt both credited the Children's Literacy Initiative, a Philadelphia-based group, with helping their teachers gain expertise in literacy instruction and assessment. That group is working with dozens of District, charter, and parochial schools in Philadelphia.

The bottom line, said Castelbuono, is that "a good teacher assesses a child all the time. That's how you adapt your instruction to get the child to the next level. If you told me my child had to sit down, with a pencil-and-paper test, then yes, I'd be concerned, but these are not those kinds of tests."

Connie Langland is a freelance writer on education issues.