

# Position Paper on Use of DIBELS for System-Wide Accountability Decisions

Ruth A. Kaminski and Roland H. Good III

Doris Baker, Kelli Cummings, Chantal Dufour-Martel, Kathleen Fleming, Nancy Knutson, Kelly Powell-Smith, Joshua Wallin  
Dynamic Measurement Group



The importance of accountability in education is greater now than perhaps at any other time in history. Accountability refers to the systematic

collection, analysis, use and reporting of valid and reliable information for making systems-wide decisions. Purposes of accountability may vary; however schools are increasingly being held responsible for student achievement and are required to demonstrate that all students are benefiting from adopted instructional programs and/or curricula. Although such requirements will ultimately be a benefit to schools, many states continue to struggle to find ways to effectively document student progress and track development toward important outcomes.

Recently there has been discussion at many levels about using DIBELS data as part of high-stakes accountability decisions—those decisions that have substantial consequences for schools including rewards for improving performance, sanctions for low performance, teacher evaluation, and continuation of grant funding. Out of a genuine concern for the appropriate use of the assessment, this paper focuses on a discussion of the appropriate uses of DIBELS and DIBELS data with respect to accountability decisions at the systems level.

DIBELS were designed to be used in a formative manner to identify children experiencing difficulty in the acquisition of basic early literacy skills in order to provide support early and prevent the occurrence of later reading difficulties. As part of the formative assessment process, DIBELS were designed to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions for those

children receiving support in order to make changes when necessary to maximize student learning and growth. Initial research on DIBELS focused on examining the technical adequacy of the measures for these primary purposes (Kaminski & Good, 1996), which remain the intended uses of DIBELS to this date (Good, Kaminski, Kameenui, & Simmons, 2001; Good, Gruba, & Kaminski 2002).

At a systems level, through use of DIBELS data collection across a school year, administrators have access to data on all students in the system. The data can be used to identify the percentage of students who are on track as well as the percentage of students who are making adequate progress. Aggregation of DIBELS data at the systems level provides information that may be used to examine the effectiveness of the instructional supports within a classroom, school, or district to help determine when changes should be made. As with decision making for individual students, when used at the systems level DIBELS data should be used *formatively to identify needs for support* at a school level. Instructional supports may include aspects of the system such as:

- a. The curricula and programs used in the school including both the core reading program and any supplemental materials or interventions
- b. Fidelity of implementation of curricula/instructional programs
- c. Time allocated for instruction or intervention
- d. Instructional grouping
- e. Content and delivery model for professional development

---

Similar to formative assessment of individual students, systems-level DIBELS data is designed to be used by in-house staff of the programs with the intent to improve the programs. In this way, systems-level DIBELS data are helpful in evaluating overall effectiveness of support across a school year and mobilizing resources to improve programs at the systems level.

It has never been the intention of the developers of DIBELS that the data be used to evaluate individual teachers or be used for other high-stakes decisions, such as funding (Good & Kaminski, 2004). The reasons against use of DIBELS for funding decisions are three-fold. First, DIBELS were not validated for such uses. It is important to remember that although DIBELS have demonstrated technical adequacy for the purposes of screening and progress monitoring, they are one-minute measures administered at one point in time. Many factors can impact a child's score and reliability of the measures is increased by repeated assessment over time (i.e., progress monitoring). Best practice in assessment deems that assessment tools should be used for the purposes for which they were validated (AERA, 1999).

Second, DIBELS data do not provide a comprehensive evaluation of the many aspects of a program that need to be considered when making high stakes decisions. DIBELS are deliberately intended *not* to assess a wide range of individual skills related to a domain nor the many aspects of a school's program related to school success. Instead, DIBELS were designed to be *indicators* of five key early literacy skills that are predictive of later reading achievement. When aggregated, the data provide a broad snapshot of general program functioning and are an *indicator* of systems-wide successes/needs.

Finally, use of any single indicator of competence to make important decisions, such as teacher evaluation or funding, violates professional standards of measurement (AERA, 1999). The importance of using other relevant information, including multiple forms

of assessment, and viewing assessment results within the context of the school cannot be overstated.

It is our concern that the use of DIBELS data for high stakes decisions will lead to misuse of DIBELS data and will compromise instructional practices. Some practices we have seen and find alarming, for example, include "teaching the test" in ways that raise test scores but do not focus on needs of students and promote broader learning of critical skills. Use of DIBELS data for high-stake decisions such as continuation of funding or employment also may encourage "cheating" in test administration and scoring. Such practices defeat the intended purposes of DIBELS.

We support the need for accountability and the use of *multiple* measures of students' and schools' achievements and success for making decisions that may have serious consequences for teachers and schools. DIBELS value is as a formative assessment and evaluation tool to help teachers and administrators to identify needs for support, whether those needs are at the individual student level or the system level. We recommend the following practices related to the use of DIBELS data as one piece of data within an accountability and/or evaluation *system*:

- a. Establishment of system-wide goals/outcomes and alignment of DIBELS with goals/outcomes
- b. Adequate training on administration, scoring, and interpretation of DIBELS data
- c. Ongoing monitoring of test administration and scoring
- d. Collection of formative data on program implementation and programmatic variables that impact student success
- e. Ongoing and integrated professional development on Big Ideas of early literacy, instruction/intervention practices, interpretation and use of data