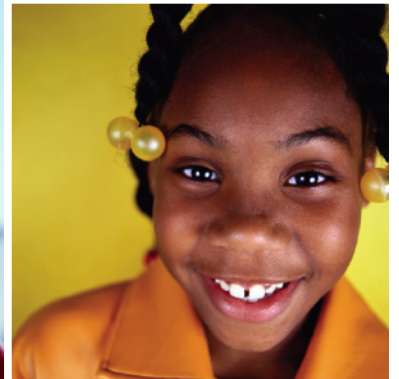


# Clayton County, Georgia:

A Case Study of Using the mCLASS® System to Achieve Improved Student Outcomes



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## Executive Summary

### The District

Located in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, the Clayton County Public Schools serve 52,200 students in 57 schools. Of these, approximately 16,000 are Kindergarten to Grade 3 students attending 35 elementary schools. Students in the district speak 70 different languages, demonstrate high poverty (more than 70 percent receive free or subsidized lunches), and exhibit low reading performance.

### The Challenge

Clayton County Public Schools, under the leadership of its Superintendent, Dr. Barbara Pulliam, recognized that it needed a better way to support its K-3 students in learning to read, to proactively reduce the number of students at risk for reading failure, and to enhance the reading skills of all students. In addition, supporting older struggling learners becomes more complex because advancing students are expected to read to learn and to demonstrate mastery in new content areas. Clayton County sought a system that would help them to easily identify at-risk K-3 students, deliver timely interventions, monitor student progress and instructional effectiveness, and track trends across the district.

Superintendent Pulliam explains, “We realized the critical need to regularly utilize both formative and summative assessments to inform instruction and decision-making at all levels, from the individual student to the district level.”

### The Solution

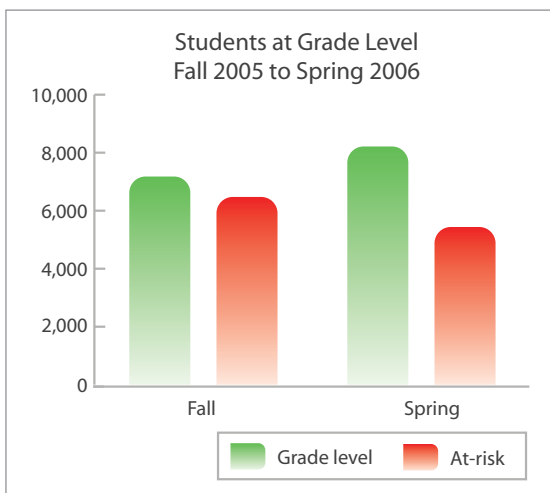
Clayton County purchased the mCLASS®:DIBELS® handheld-to-Web assessment and reporting software system. The state of Georgia requires districts to use the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS®) screening and progress monitoring assessment in their Reading First schools. After implementing the mCLASS:DIBELS system in its Reading First schools during the 2004-2005 school year, Clayton County expanded the program district-wide in grades K-3.

### The Results

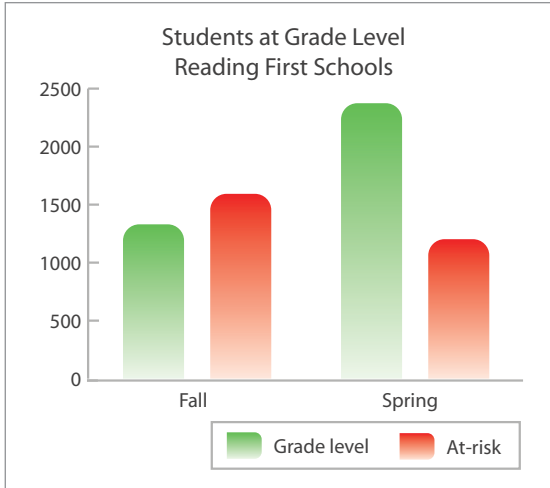
Clayton County is improving learning outcomes and transforming literacy instruction for its K-3 students. The district’s entire instructional program is structured around mCLASS:DIBELS results, which are used to create three instructional groups in each classroom (Intensive, Strategic, Benchmark). The graph at left shows changes in student performance between the fall and spring of the 2005-2006 academic year. Similar results were obtained in 2004-2005.

“The mCLASS:DIBELS system gives us a benchmark – not only to know where we’re going, but also the goals we want to exceed.”

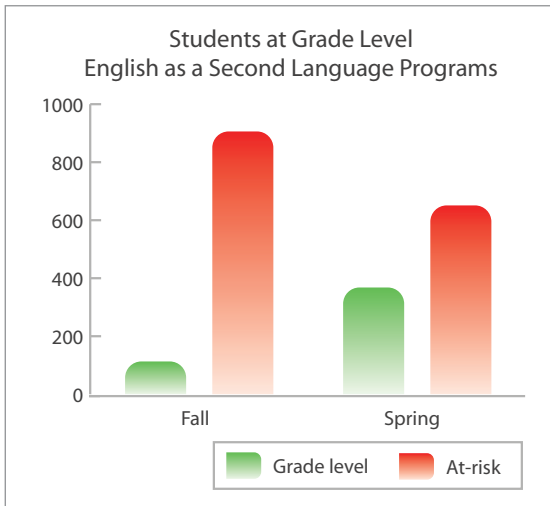
Elaine Thames  
Coordinator, Reading First and Federal Programs  
Clayton County Public Schools



During the 2005-2006 school year, 1,040 students (8 percent of the district’s K-3 students) moved from high-risk or medium-risk status up to grade level. The population of at-risk students correspondingly decreased.



*Sixty percent of students in Reading First schools were at grade level by spring 2006, compared to 47 percent in the fall.*



*Thirty-six percent of ESL students reached grade level by spring 2006, compared to just 11 percent in fall 2005.*

The impact was particularly evident among schools and students with the greatest levels of need, specifically in Reading First schools (which serve students exhibiting the most poverty and the lowest reading scores), and for non-native speakers of English (who are at the greatest risk for failing to master the curriculum).

These results are achieved by using the mCLASS:DIBELS system to screen for learning difficulties, plan instruction, and monitor student reading improvement and instructional effectiveness. District staff set high expectations for student achievement, strategize and work with teachers who are not helping students to improve sufficiently, and move quickly to provide additional support to students who need it.

As Elaine Thames, Coordinator of Reading First and Federal Programs, explains, "The mCLASS:DIBELS system gives us a benchmark – not only to know where we're going, but also the goals we want to exceed."

## Full Report

School: Indian Island School Class: K - Babineau

Beginning Benchmark Middle Benchmark End Benchmark Progress Monitoring

Kindergarten : Beginning Benchmark

ISF

Goal: 8

NAME	SCORE	STATUS	PCTILE
<b>INTENSIVE</b>			
Loring, Austin	3	HIGH RISK	15
Green, Josephine	4	HIGH RISK	21
<b>STRATEGIC</b>			
Cummings, Bradley	5	SOME RISK	47
Sapitel-Boba... Minnie	6	SOME RISK	32
<b>BENCHMARK</b>			
Fields, Sarah	11	LOW RISK	56
Johnson, Kahlan	19	LOW RISK	79
LeDretton, Tia Rose	16	LOW RISK	72

The mCLASS:DIBELS Class Summary reports identify at-risk students and their specific instructional needs.\*

It was a regular meeting of Clayton County reading coaches with Mary Damer, the district's professional development expert.

"Let's review how your classes are doing," Damer said. The coaches logged onto the mCLASS Web site, clicked a link, and pulled up reports displaying the literacy skill development of every student in their schools.

Damer leaned in to look at one coach's computer screen (see report at right). "I like how this kindergarten teacher is doing," she said. "It's only October, and almost every student is at the score we want them to have by January."

Damer pointed to a couple of students. "I see that these two students are struggling," she added. "Let's look at their individual item-level reports to determine where they need support."

The Clayton County Public Schools use **mCLASS:DIBELS assessment and reporting software** to monitor students' reading abilities and to plan for targeted, individualized intervention. Since Fall 2004, the software has enabled strong communication between teachers, reading coaches, administrators, and parents about how to improve instruction for specific students who are losing ground, and how to promote continued achievement among students at grade level. As Damer explains, "If your doctor tells you that your cholesterol is too high, you don't want to wait until you have a heart attack before he intervenes. You want him to test you monthly and adjust your medication to keep you healthy."

With effective, assessment-based intervention, Clayton County's students are remaining academically healthy and learning to read on time.

Located in a suburb of Atlanta, the Clayton County Public Schools serve 52,200 students in 57 schools. Of these, 16,000 are K-3 students attending 35 elementary schools. Students in the district speak 70 different languages. More than 70 percent receive free or subsidized lunches. Many exhibit low reading performance.

Superintendent Pulliam explains, "We realized the critical need to regularly utilize both formative and summative assessments to inform instruction and decision-making at all levels, from the individual student to the district level."

### Finding a More Efficient Way to Perform and Use Formative Assessment

Clayton County initially purchased the mCLASS:DIBELS assessment and reporting software for its Reading First schools, and then expanded district-wide as part of a plan to improve reading

"There's no other way that we could realistically progress monitor our students this often and use the information effectively"

Mary Damer  
Professional Development Consultant  
Multi-Tier, LLC

\* The mCLASS:DIBELS screens on pages 3 through 6 are intended to illustrate how the system works. No Clayton County student data is shown in these sample screens.

“With frequent progress monitoring, we can actually use the data to enhance the learning of the child”

Wanda Oliver  
Reading First program specialist  
Georgia Department of Education

achievement for students in Kindergarten through Grade 3. The county administers benchmark assessments three times a year to group students into three instructional tiers; the benchmark assessments include mCLASS:DIBELS as well as other instruments. Because the mCLASS system makes it dramatically more efficient to do so, Clayton County gives the DIBELS assessment more frequently than required by Reading First – as often as once a week – to monitor student growth and the effectiveness of instruction. “With frequent progress monitoring, we can actually use the data to enhance the learning of the child,” Wanda Oliver, the Georgia Reading First program specialist working with Clayton County, says.

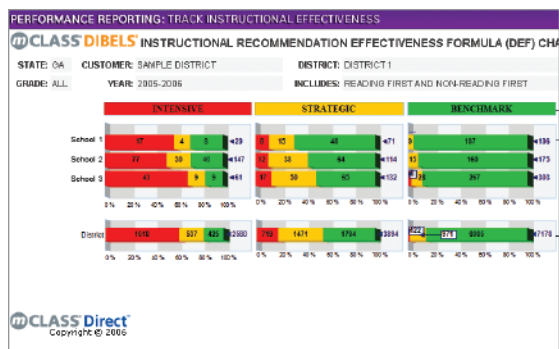
“We are so lucky to have this technology,” Damer adds. “There’s no other way that we could realistically progress monitor our students this often and use the information effectively.”

The mCLASS:DIBELS assessment system uses short, one-minute probes to measure reading achievement. As early as Kindergarten, these probes identify students at risk for not learning to read, so that educators can work to keep all students on track. The mCLASS system also aggregates student data into easy-to-read Web-based reports on item-level results and longitudinal performance for individual students, classes, and schools, providing an accurate picture of student growth over time on grade-appropriate tasks, as well as targeted instructional suggestions, and letters to parents that describe their child’s learning needs.

Superintendent Pulliam explains that this data is useful for both teachers and administrators: “The mCLASS:DIBELS system enables us to use student progress monitoring data immediately to identify students’ literacy strengths and needs, to adjust instruction to best fit the students, and to inform parents regarding their children’s progress in a timely manner.”

Using the mCLASS system, Clayton County teachers and district staff systematically examine:

- Which students need intervention to meet critical learning goals, and whether those interventions are working
- The specific reading errors these students make, so the teacher can address them through targeted instruction
- Any students who require broad changes in how they are taught because they are not responding well to their teacher’s current approach
- Whether top-performing students are mastering the curriculum and continuing to achieve



mCLASS:Direct reports are clear, graphical, real-time representations that help educators visualize progress for students (including demographic subgroups), teachers, and schools.

In the chart above, the red, yellow, and green bars indicate how many students moved out of each risk category during the past school year, how many increased their risk level, and how many did not change their status. Reports can be run between assessment periods or for the full year.

“This pretty much drives my whole reading instruction.”

Quincy Harris  
Grade 2 teacher  
Clayton County Public Schools

- Error patterns across a class or grade, which point to concepts that require review or that the current curriculum may not adequately address
- District-wide error patterns which may indicate the need to adopt new instructional resources
- The classroom teachers who need extra professional development, or who can model best practices for their peers

Armed with this information, Clayton County teachers and district staff plan instruction that effectively addresses student needs.

### Transforming Classroom Instruction

The experience of Quincy Harris, a second grade teacher, illustrates how conducting weekly progress monitoring assessments transforms instruction.

Like all other K-3 teachers in Clayton County, Mr. Harris integrates the one-minute assessments into the daily period for reading instruction.

“This pretty much drives my whole reading instruction,” he says. “Because I progress monitor my students, I know their strengths and weaknesses. And I know what to work on with them.”

While the other students work independently at their desks or in literacy centers, Mr. Harris calls children one-by-one to his desk at the back of the room to listen to them read aloud from a short passage. He listens carefully to the precise sounds they articulate and records any errors on the handheld computer.

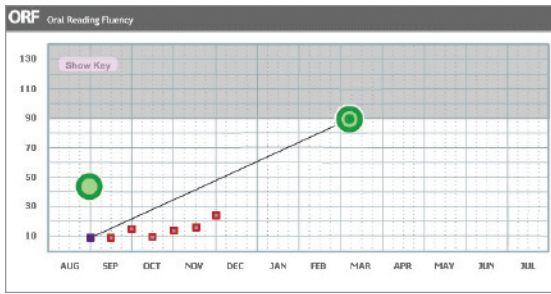
Mr. Harris uses each session as a teaching opportunity. He asks one student to reread certain sentences and points out how to blend the letters into words or the words into fluid sentences. With another student, he reviews how to pronounce certain words and points out the suffixes she learned that week. He reminds a third student to slow down and to read every word. Mr. Harris makes notes of these interactions on his handheld so he can review them later when planning instruction.

\* \*

Mr. Harris uses progress monitoring reports from the mCLASS Web site to plan weekly instruction for individual students, for each instructional group, and for the entire class.



The mCLASS:DIBELS software includes an observational checklist for recording specific reading behaviors



The mCLASS Web site displays progress charts; this one indicates that Lisa needs extra instruction to reach her goal.

**Individual students:** Assessment snapshots and student progress reports enable Mr. Harris to evaluate each student's long-term growth against their benchmarks. "Lisa\* started with a score of nine words read correctly per minute in September," he says. "I knew that was a red light. She's still only up to 23, and she needs to be at a score of 90 by the end of the year. When the score doesn't improve, I need to figure out what the issue is." He sends home activities for Lisa's parents to do with her, and checks with them regularly. He also consults his school's literacy coach for additional strategies.

**Instructional groups:** Summary reports help Mr. Harris to identify patterns across students. "Since every child in the top group already knows silent consonants, I know that I don't need to keep teaching that to them. But I'm noticing that several students in that group need to review suffixes like -ed and -ing as they start to read more quickly." He decides to review these concepts at the next small-group lesson.



The mCLASS:DIBELS system provides instructional recommendations for specific students.

**Entire class:** Mr. Harris discusses the DIBELS results with other teachers at weekly grade-level meetings, and uses them as a springboard for discussing best practices. "When you see a child jump from a score of 24 to 60, you want to share that information," he says. "We talk about what we are doing in the classroom to foster that improvement." The teachers also brainstorm during these meetings about supporting individual students, referring to the mCLASS:DIBELS Act instructional recommendations as well as to the district's instructional resources.

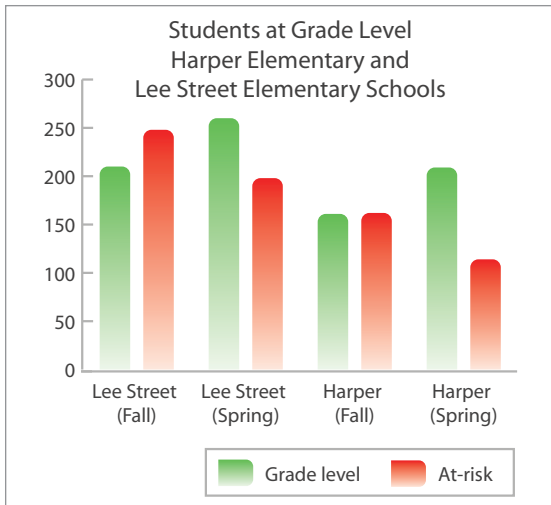
**Parents:** Mr. Harris uses mCLASS:DIBELS reports to discuss home-based activities with parents. "I tell them where their child was three months ago, and how much he has improved since then. And I tell them that if they keep reading with him, his score will improve even further." He reviews specific errors: "I can pull up the report and say, David\* didn't know short e's at first, but he got it when he did it the second time." (See example at left, below.) He also uses the assessments as a way to reinforce the need for parents to work with children at home: "I tell them that it's all about practicing, modeling, practicing, and more modeling... so that they can reach a score of 90 by the end of second grade."

Word	Letter	Score	Word	Letter	Score
v o g t e i u t	e	2/3	v o v i a c	v	3/3
z e k r o k e n	e	1/2	z u b p e z	p	2/3
i v i l i g f a f w e l k o z	w	2/2			
w o m j o p d a v e g i a f	e	1/2			
k l i z f o m i m f o s k u j	f	2/2			
z a b y o m w u j s e d k i b	s	2/3			

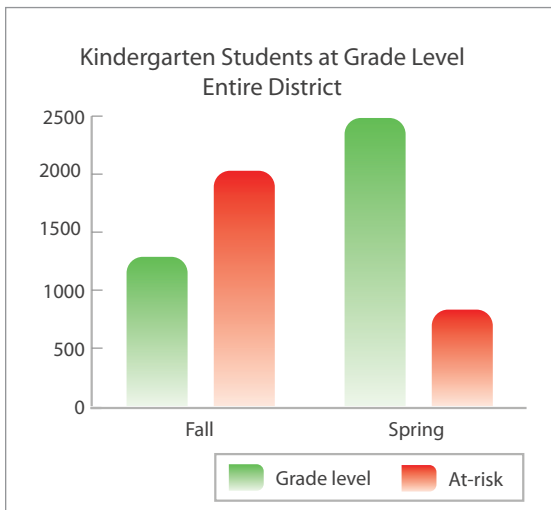
Teachers can use the mCLASS:DIBELS Web reports to show parents exactly where their children are having difficulty.

Like Mr. Harris, all Clayton County teachers use the progress monitoring sessions as an opportunity to observe students and relate their observations to students' ongoing instructional needs. Teachers in Kindergarten through Grade 2 concentrate on whether their students have mastered specific phonics elements that were explicitly taught in class, and identify opportunities to review and build on specific skills. Grade 3 teachers focus on their students' abilities to read aloud with proper intonation and modulation. The mCLASS system gives these teachers continual, clear insight into how well students are mastering the curriculum, and whether the instruction is appropriate and meeting their needs.

\* Not their real names.



By spring 2006, the percent of students at grade level increased from 46 to 57 percent at Harper Elementary School and from 50 to 65 percent at Lee Street Elementary School.



District-wide, the percentage of Kindergarten students at grade level increased from 39% to 75% in 2005-2006.

“It’s almost like a revelation... to use concrete data to set up instruction in your classrooms.”

Cassandra Hopkins  
Principal  
Lee Street Elementary School

## Helping School and District Officials to Provide Instructional Leadership

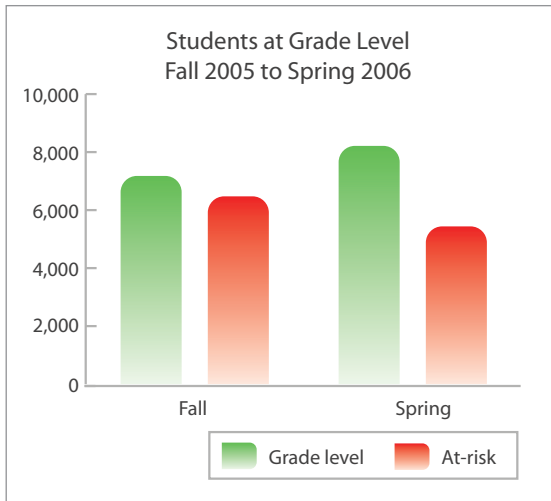
Clayton County school and district leaders are actively involved in the efforts to use mCLASS:DIBELS data to improve student outcomes.

Frequent review and analysis of the mCLASS:DIBELS reports enable principals and literacy coaches to home in quickly on classrooms that need to modify their instructional practices. “The DIBELS helps me identify when a teacher needs additional support,” Principal Cassandra Hopkins of Lee Street Elementary says. She assigns a literacy coach to analyze the specific problem (for example, class-wide difficulty in phonemic awareness or a need to challenge more advanced students), to work with the teacher, and to model effective practices. “The teachers who we worked with had very positive reactions to the system,” she says. “We explained that we were not just singling them out. The data speaks for itself.” In fact, the number of Lee Street Elementary K-3 students performing at grade level increased from 50 to 65 percent by the end of the year. (See chart, top left.)

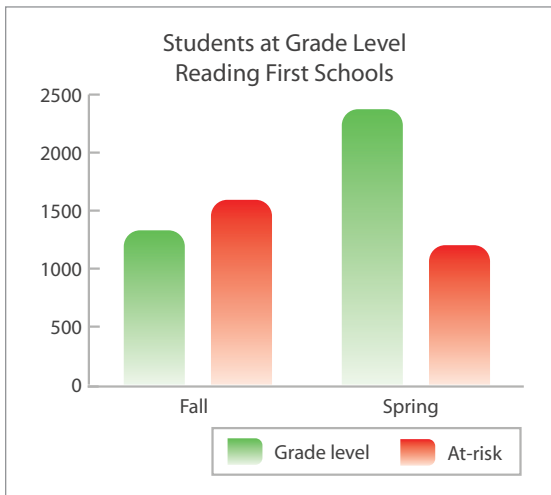
The mCLASS Web site provides a longitudinal view of school and class achievement that enables principals to understand how much progress is appropriate for each classroom. “You have to know the makeup of each class,” Hopkins says. “If a second-grade classroom had a large number of high-risk students coming in, but we see appropriate growth, they’re doing ok.” By contrast, she says, “Kindergarten students come to us as a blank slate, so I get particularly concerned when most of a teacher’s students are in the high-risk group.” District-wide, the percentage of Kindergarten students at grade level increased from 39 to 75 percent by the end of the year. (See chart, bottom left.)

Principals also use the reports to encourage teachers to learn from each other. “It is harder to be negative when you see that another teacher is succeeding with students of the same caliber,” says Lynda Daniel, principal of Harper Elementary. At faculty meetings, Principal Daniel spotlights teachers who work well with the mCLASS system so their colleagues can ask them for advice. Her efforts have raised school-wide achievement: 57 percent of her K-3 students were at grade level by the end of the year, an increase of 11 percent. (See chart, top left.)

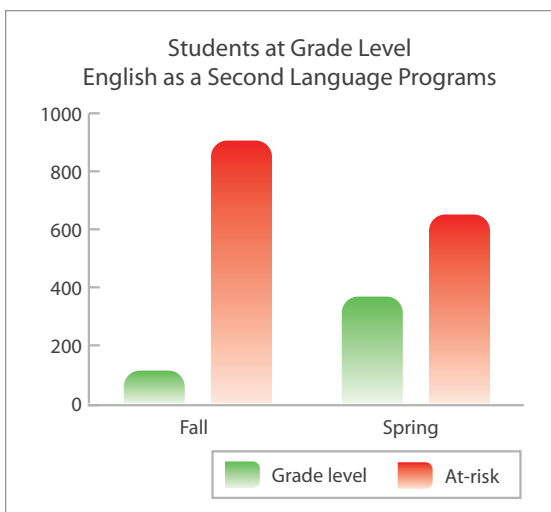
**Parent Communication:** Principal Daniel stresses students’ instructional needs when she calls parents about behavioral issues, telling them that students really need to be in the classroom instead of in her office. “A lot of these students are having reading difficulties,” she says. Hopkins adds, “I tell parents that students’ scores will suffer because they aren’t getting the daily instruction they need when their behavior pulls them from class.”



During the 2005-2006 school year, 1,040 students (8 percent of the district's K-3 students) moved from high-risk or medium-risk status to grade level. The population of at-risk students correspondingly decreased.



60% of students in Reading First schools were at grade level by spring 2006, compared to 47% in the fall.



36% of ESL students reached grade level by spring 2006, compared to just 11% in fall 2005.

Principals across the district use the mCLASS:DIBELS system to plan and manage instruction. As Principal Hopkins says, "It's almost like a revelation – to see it in black and white, to see the numbers, and to use concrete data to decide how you are going to set up instruction in your classrooms. I don't know where we were before all of this came into our lives."

### Improving Student Outcomes

The district's efforts have succeeded in raising children's achievement. By the end of the 2005-2006 school year, 1,040 at-risk students (8 percent of the county's K-3 students) reached grade level, joining the 7,200 who remained at grade level. One hundred twenty-one students who started the year in the high-risk Intensive group moved to one of the two higher instructional tiers, while 915 students moved from the mid-performing Strategic support group. Thirty-three of 35 elementary schools substantially increased the number of students at grade level between the beginning and end of the year.

The impact was particularly evident among schools and students with the greatest levels of need, specifically in Reading First schools (which serve students with the most poverty and the lowest reading scores), and for non-native speakers of English (who are at the greatest risk for failing to master the curriculum).

Dr. Debbie Bass, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning remarks, "We are dedicating our resources and professional efforts to increasing reading success for all our students, and we are excited about the reading progress our students, particularly those at greatest risk, are demonstrating."

### Conclusions

By using mCLASS:DIBELS software to conduct frequent, formative assessment, Clayton County has transformed its instructional system. The district's success stems from its integration of mCLASS:DIBELS student data into all levels of instruction combined with a strong literacy curriculum and an active professional development program.

Because Clayton County educators understand their students' literacy behaviors so well, they can deliver the right instruction at the right time, using the district curriculum as well as creative approaches that teachers develop through collaborations and knowledge-sharing at school- and district-wide meetings. Access to student data enables literacy coaches to intervene when students are not performing as well as expected, and enables principals to identify teachers who need extra support or resources, or who can model best practices for colleagues.

Thirty-three of 35 elementary schools substantially increased the number of students at grade level between September 2005 and June 2006.

The mCLASS system enables teachers and administrators to communicate clearly with parents about how they can help students at home. Teachers can use mCLASS Web reports to explain exactly which concepts students must master, discuss at-home learning activities that can help, and follow up later with parents to show them how their involvement is paying off. Principals use student data to reduce student absences and to explore whether misbehavior is related to low reading performance.

Clayton County enhances these effects through its management practices. Staff at all levels in each school, from the paraprofessional to the principal, are trained in understanding the purpose of frequent assessment and the meaning of mCLASS:DIBELS results, so they can use and discuss the data fluently. The district sets clear goals for student performance on the assessments, communicating to teachers why scores need to continually improve. As well, the district sets clear expectations for the frequency of monitoring student progress, explains how much teachers can learn from doing so, and checks (using the mCLASS reports) to ensure that teachers are following through.

The results for all students, and particularly for high-risk groups, bear out the success of the program. As Elaine Thames, Coordinator of Reading First and Federal Programs, explains, “The mCLASS:DIBELS system gives us a benchmark – not only to know where we’re going, but also the goals we want to exceed.”