

The question of testing students "off-level" seems to be a common one for teachers of students with special needs.

Here is how I respond:

The use of any testing should be preceded by a question. The question is what the test is intended to help us answer. So let me run through a few scenarios:

1. If the purpose of DIBELS is prevention by ensuring that students are proficient in certain skills on a certain timeline, then the use of DIBELS "off-level" would violate the essential purpose of DIBELS. Because off-level testing would mean that the student is not on track, without a timeline a goal is a dream.
2. If the purpose of DIBELS is to gain a normative perspective (as would be the purpose in an RtI framework), then "off-level" testing would be comparing children to the wrong normative group (by making the actual grade level look better than it actually is, and at the same time making the lower grade level look either better or worse than it actually is depending on how the special ed students who were tested off grade level performed). Specifically, assume that the bottom 10% of students in grade 3 are in special education. Further assume these students were tested "off-level" thus are not included in grade 3 norms. Thus, "off-level" testing would result in cutting the bottom 10% of the distribution off, and the new 15th percentile would be the 25th percentile. If we were to use the 15th percentile as the cut-off for problem-solving, then we would be systematically over-taxing our resources.
3. If the purpose of DIBELS is individualized progress monitoring, then I would assume that the results are likely to be shared with parents. Telling a parent of a third grade student that their child has established phonological awareness skill (expected by end of kindergarten) would be confusing at best. If the child is so low that they can not perform the task at all at grade level, then my suggestion is to obtain sufficient documentation of that lack of skill for reporting to parents, and then selecting an instructional program that has built in tests of skill mastery to document progress. Consider the analogy of a trip from Waukegan to Springfield for a moment. DIBELS essentially is asking the question, "...are we on track to get there in time, or are we there yet?" If we started down 41, but there was an accident at Touhy Av, I might get off at before Touhy to go to west 294. IF I was not familiar with the area, and If DIBELS measured progress toward Springfield, the answer to the question would be "...No, we are not there yet, and NO, we are not on track to get there on time - Can you get me different map to help me to see where I need to get off to get to 294?" In this way DIBELS serves as the general outcome measure (getting to Springfield) which is still important, but I also need a

more detailed map that would show me that I can get off at Dempster (before Touhy) to get over to 294, so that I could get back on track on my trip to Springfield. The other map in this case might be the use of a systematic method of evaluation procedures like Curriculum-Based Evaluation (Howell, Fox, & Morehead, (1993). Curriculum-Based Evaluation (2nd Ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.)

"Is there ever a time that staff should use DIBELS for off-level testing?"

I would not say never, but I would say that "off-level" testing without sufficient staff development is like opening Pandora's box. Explaining what you are doing with parents will become more difficult, and staff understanding becomes more problematic.

So here are the caveats:

- **Caveat #1.** The student shows too little behavior on grade level probes. The stopping rule for DIBELS is typically within less than 10 seconds (no corrects for the first line, or first 5 items depending on the measure). With Curriculum-Based Measurement (The original DIBS - Dynamic Indicators of Basic Skills) the rule was that if a child obtained a score of less than 10 on grade level probes then lower levels could be used for progress monitoring.
- **Caveat #2.** Using DIBELS as part of the survey level assessment plan to find instructional level. Teaching and testing are not the same. Even though we use DIBELS for benchmark testing and for progress monitoring, DIBELS can be used to determine appropriate grade level material for an individual. In this case, the individual student is compared to typical performance of grade level students **ONLY TO DETERMINE WHAT MATERIAL IS MOST APPROPRIATE for teaching, NOT TESTING.**

We have all heard people advocate for use of DIBELS for all kinds of things, including monitoring progress of level (low expectations), for teaching specific tests (simply confused) and even for grade retention policy (wrong idea) etc...DIBELS is a powerful school improvement tool when it is used in the scope in which it was designed and as it was designed to be used. DIBELS is not the cure for cancer, and it is not a curriculum. DIBELS is a set of brief standardized measures that are key INDICATORS of developing early literacy skills.