

Practice Guide

Assessments for Literacy Programs

October 2025

Introduction

In Research for Action's (RFA's) evaluation of four literacy support programs, staff consistently emphasized the importance of literacy assessments. Assessments serve multiple critical functions: they identify which students should participate, group students by skill level, inform lesson planning, and measure program effectiveness. Despite their usefulness, literacy assessments require significant time and resources, and not all assessments are equally valuable depending on program goals. This Practice Guide summarizes what RFA learned about literacy assessments from program staff and through direct experience working with assessments during our evaluation.

Why Assess Students...Again?

Most students are assessed on literacy skills through their regular classroom instruction. Nevertheless, many literacy support programs administer their own assessments for several reasons: some lack timely access to school data systems; others seek more detailed progress information; and some work across multiple schools with differing assessments and need a consistent tool for program-wide progress tracking.

In RFA's 2022–2025 evaluation, all four programs administered their own assessments in addition to those conducted by schools. Some programs used minimal supplemental assessments—only the progress monitoring embedded in their curricula—while others invested heavily, administering benchmark assessments three times annually (fall, winter, spring) alongside regular progress monitoring. Because each program had distinct aims and structures, they prioritized different assessment types; there is no single assessment that fits all needs.



What Programs Look for in a Literacy Assessment

Key features 🔍	Description
Identifies participants	Some programs used beginning-of-year assessments to make decisions about who to enroll in the program, prioritizing those reading below grade level. Other programs served all students regardless of initial assessment performance.
Groups by skill	All programs used assessments to assemble small groups or pairs of students working on similar literacy skills. Sometimes these groups were long term (lasting up to the full school year) and sometimes they were flexible (just for one activity, or short-term until the next assessment triggered a re-grouping).
Affordable	Free or low-cost assessments were preferred to preserve limited budgets.
Easy to administer by an instructor	Programs favored instructor-administered, low-technology assessments requiring minimal training. Computerized assessments were not favored because of the logistical and financial challenges of coordinating the technology and subscriptions across multiple sites.
Quick to administer	Assessments lasting only a few minutes allowed instructors to test all students without losing excessive instructional time. Quick assessments also permit more frequent assessment, in some cases up to once per week for progress monitoring.
Supports lesson planning	Effective assessments provided actionable domains linked to instruction, helping instructors plan lessons efficiently. Quick, progress-monitoring assessments were best suited to this purpose, providing direction for the next lesson without taking up too much time.
Measures reading growth	Programs used pre/post or periodic assessments to summarize student progress and identify subgroup trends. Measures of reading growth were summarized across all students in the program to provide an overall sense of student performance and program effectiveness.
Nationally normed	Many programs looked for an assessment to be nationally normed, or tested on a nationally representative sample of students, so that program staff could understand participating students' progress relative to other students.
Familiar and interpretable to many audiences	Programs look for assessments that have results that are familiar and interpretable to school partners, families, and funders. Programs use assessment results for a variety of audiences with different levels of familiarity with literacy assessments and different needs for specificity vs. high-level summaries.

Commonly Used Literacy Assessments and their Characteristics

✓ = Yes ~ = Sometimes ✗ = No

Assessment	CORE Phonics Survey	DIBELS 8 th Edition	MAP Growth Reading (NWEA)	MAP Reading Fluency	Star Early Literacy	Star Reading
Description	A criteria-referenced assessment for phonics skills, from letter sounds to multisyllabic words.	A series of assessments that test literacy skills depending on grade level, from letter recognition to comprehension.	A computer-adaptive assessment that measures reading skills.	A computerized test that assesses early oral reading skills, from phonological awareness to fluency.	A computer-adaptive assessment that measures early literacy skills.	A computer-adaptive assessment that assesses reading comprehension and vocabulary.
Grade levels	K-2nd	K-8th	K-12th	PreK-5th	PreK-3rd	K-12th
Key features Can be used to determine who needs program supports	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Can be used to group students based on skills	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Affordable	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Easy to administer by an instructor	✓	✓	✗ Computer-administered	✗ Computer-administered	✗ Computer-administered	✗ Computer-administered
Quick to administer	✓ 10-15 mins	✓ 4-9 mins	✗ 15-60 mins	✗ 20 mins	✓ 10-15 mins	✗ 20-30 mins
Can be used to plan lessons	~	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Measures reading growth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nationally normed	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Familiar and interpretable to many audiences	~	~	~	~	~	~

Recommendations

Select assessments that align with the needs “on the ground”

Programs should choose assessments aligned with their curricula and instructional goals, particularly those that support student grouping and lesson planning. Based on our analysis, DIBELS 8th Edition meets a broad range of desired features but may not fit every program’s priorities.

Avoid over-assessment

Whenever possible, literacy programs should use existing school data to minimize duplication and preserve instructional time. Schools can assist by facilitating timely, secure data sharing with program partners.

Translate assessment results for different audiences

Program leaders noted challenges communicating results to funders, families, and school partners. To improve clarity, programs can tailor reporting by audience—using grade-level equivalents or percentiles for funders and families, while providing skill-based breakdowns for teachers and administrators. Assessment publishers’ family-friendly materials can further support communication.

Feedback?

RFA is always learning more about assessments and the intersection between the way assessment publishers intend them for use and the way they are used “on the ground.” If you have a literacy assessment you particularly love or additional thoughts about literacy assessment best practices, particularly for literacy support programs, please reach out to RFA at klaparo@researchforaction.org.

About this practice guide

This practice guide is one of several reports culminating from RFA’s three-year evaluation of four pilot literacy programs in Philadelphia funded by the William Penn Foundation. This short, targeted brief is intended to share specific learnings from the field that will be useful to literacy practitioners. The data from this guide is drawn from three years of outcomes evaluations for four programs, document reviews of publicly available assessment materials (including assessment administration materials and technical manuals), as well as 29 interviews with program leaders, program instructors, and school personnel. Findings were subjected to a final member-check interview with six program leaders to collect feedback, refine findings, and add detail.

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