Building Roads for Students' Success

Reflection Sheet: Monitoring Progress in Early Literacy Programs with Cirriculum Based Measurement

Key Points

- CBM is a reliable and scientifically-validated way of measuring students' progress and response to instruction.
- CBM is responsive to instructional change.
- CBM provides data around which the school team can have meaningful discussions about achievement.

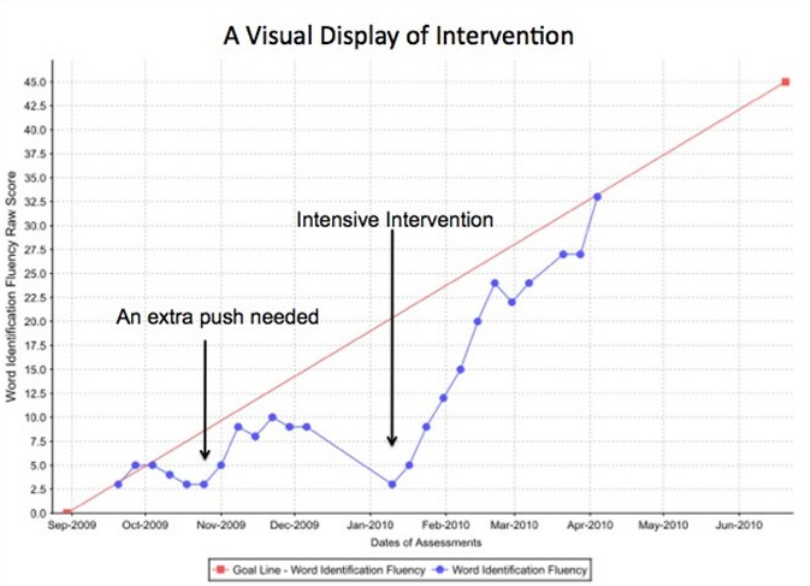
There are many literacy programs in use today in primary classrooms. No matter the specific program, the same questions may occur to educators: Is it working for my students? Are my students making progress? It's worth considering what kinds of evidence we could use to we answer that question. Teacher judgment, student work, performance on assessments are some of the sources of information that we may use. As powerful as these sources of information are, however, they are not designed to focus specifically on progress over time. Learning is a gradual process and educators expect that students will show progress over time on key literacy skills. What rate of progress should we expect, and how can we know if students are making progress? One approach that has been used to measure student progress is known as curriculum based measurement (CBM).

CBM consists of a series of quick probes in a number of key basic literacy skills. They are quick (generally 1- 3 minutes) and easy for the classroom teacher to administer, and they are geared to the developmental stages of reading: for example, phoneme segmentation and letter sounds in kindergarten, word reading and passage reading in grade 1, and passage reading in grade 2/3. Because CBM are timed, they provide an index of fluency in basic skills. As students respond to classroom instruction, they get more opportunities to practice these skills successfully and they build automaticity, allowing them to focus the bulk of their conscious attention on comprehension. Children who struggle to acquire the key concepts and skills through regular language arts instruction are much less likely to achieve fluency, and this has negative effects on comprehension downstream.

CBM probes are all at the same level. For example, Grade 2 passage reading probes are a variety of short passages, each at the end of Grade 2 reading level. Because, ultimately, we want the child to be able to reach the curriculum expectations, the CBM probes provide a standing target against which we can measure progress throughout the year.

Research provides norming information on fluency levels for the primary grades, and a notion of what reasonable gains are across the school year. This information allows us to set a goal line from where the student is at the beginning of the year, to where we want them to be at the end of the year. Periodic monitoring of progress through CBM indicates if and how the student is responding to classroom instruction. In the chart shown here, the red line is the goal line, and the blue line represents frequent progress monitoring points. This (fictional) chart shows a student who is struggling, and who is not responding to classroom instruction. The chart shows a slight gain when a little bit of extra focus was given to the child, but insufficient growth to reach the goal line. When a more intensive program around literacy was put in place for this child, progress is more marked.

One of the benefits of CBM is its sensitivity to instructional change. Note that CBM does not tell a teacher what to do, it merely tells her whether the students are making progress in their current program. Especially for students who struggle with learning to read, differentiated instruction may be required. Regular monitoring of progress can be useful in determining whether choices around differentiation are effective or whether additional support is needed. Charting progress or failure to make progress provides valuable data for members of the school team to discuss the achievement of various students.



"CBM does not tell a teacher what to do, it merely tells the teacher if the students are making progress in their current program."

This Reflection Sheet was produced by Lesly Wade-Woolley & Chris Mattatall of Queen's University based on portions of the 2010 Building Roads for Students' Success research paper produced as part of a MISA Professional Network Project with funding assistance from The Ministry of Education of Ontario. (Contact: Marilyn Kasian: Marilyn.kasian@ottawacatholicschools.ca)