Effective Instruction for Middle School Students with Reading Difficulties:

The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook

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Chapter 1: Overview of Assessment at the Secondary Level

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Part 1 | Assessing Struggling Readers at the Secondary Level

In this section we will provide an overview of the process of assessment for secondary struggling readers. We introduce a teacher, Miss Lopez, to illustrate the process.

Miss Lopez is a reading teacher in a middle school. Last year she had a very challenging class in which all 20 students were reading below grade level and seemed to have different needs. Because she did not have a specific reading curriculum, she was expected to develop her own lessons or modify whatever materials she could find. As a result, she did not feel that she was able to adequately meet the needs of her students.

In addition to the self-imposed pressure she felt to help her students, Miss Lopez was faced with the increasing demands of the state assessments. She wants to avoid this situation this year by learning how she can provide more effective instruction, but she is still unsure about how to get started.

TERMS TO KNOW

Alphabetic principle	Understanding that the sequence of letters in a written word represents phonemes in a spoken word and can be recombined to form other words
Anecdotal records	Quick notes taken by teachers during or immediately after instructional time to record students' responses to instruction, particularly evidence of students' strengths and needs to guide future instructional planning

Cloze test	An assessment of reading comprehension in which students read a passage with words systematically deleted. Students must supply the deleted words.
Comprehension	The ability to understand what is read—the ultimate goal of reading
Diagnostic assessments	Assessments designed to refine a teacher's understanding of student strengths and weaknesses to inform instructional decisions
Fluency	The ability to read with speed, accuracy, appropriate phrasing, and expression
Frustration reading level	Text that is too difficult for students; when students repeatedly read text at this level, they may develop counterproductive habits
Independent reading level	Text that the student can read on his or her own, without support (also called the "homework level")
Informal Reading Inventory	An assessment consisting of text passages at increasing levels of difficulty, used to determine students' independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels and to measure comprehension (and sometimes fluency) in increasingly difficult text. Students read passages at different reading levels and answer questions while teachers take notes regarding the students' reading behaviors.
Instructional reading level	Text that students can read with assistance, or instruction; this level is best for teaching students how to become better readers
Intervention	Intensive instruction designed to help remediate a student's difficulties; usually provided in addition to the student's regular instruction
Letter-sound correspondence	The relationship between letters or letter combinations and the sounds they represent
Maze test	An assessment of reading comprehension in which students read a passage with words systematically deleted. For each deleted word, students select the appropriate word from three possible words so that the passage makes sense; a multiple-choice cloze test.
Phoneme	The smallest unit of sound in a language. English has about 40 phonemes, which are represented by about 250 letters or letter combinations. For example, the long *a* sound (a phoneme) can be represented by the letter *a* with a silent *e* (lake), *ai* (rain), *ay* (day), *a* (paper), *eigh* (eight), *ey* (they), *ea* (steak), *ei* (vein), and *aigh* (straight).
Phonemic awareness	One kind of phonological awareness; the ability to hear and manipulate sounds within words, usually demonstrated by segmenting words into their individual sounds and blending sounds to form words; an auditory skill, but should be linked with instruction in letters or letter sounds (phonics)

The Reading Teacher's Sourcebook

Phonological awareness	Awareness of components of spoken language, demonstrated through auditory skills, including the ability to identify words in spoken sentences, to segment words into onset-rime units and syllables, and the ability to manipulate discrete sounds in words
Progress monitoring measures	Brief assessments of growth toward a particular academic goal, given frequently and used to guide instructional decision-making
Screening measures	Brief assessments that focus on the critical skills of reading for the purpose of identifying students who may need additional support
Sight word	A word that is recognized immediately as a whole, without applying word analysis or decoding strategies
Word recognition	The accurate reading of words

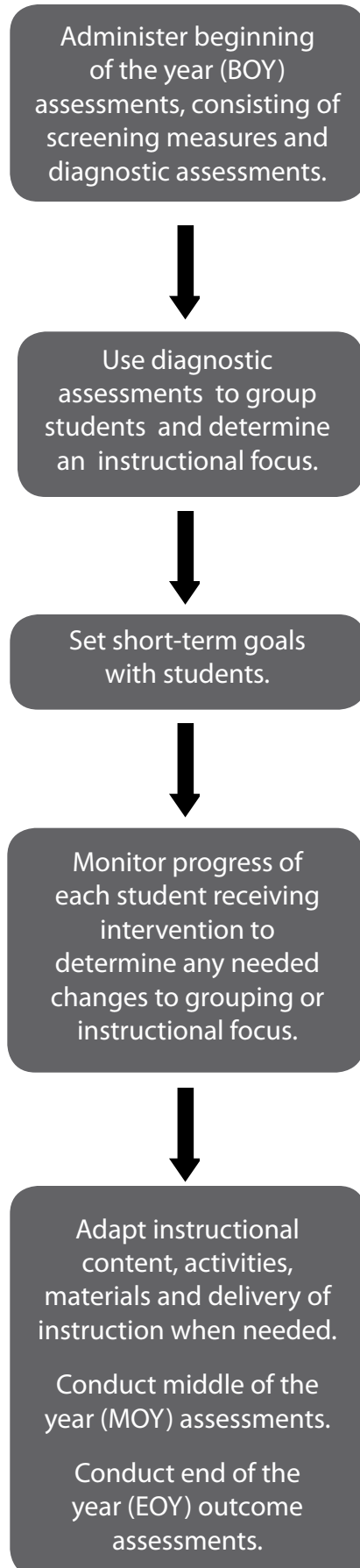*Harris & Hodges (1995); Moats (2000)*

Chapter 1
Overview of Assessment at the Secondary Level

Remember Miss Lopez? She wants to provide more effective instruction to struggling readers in her middle school classes. The first priority to improve instruction for struggling readers is to conduct reading assessments. Conducting assessments allows teachers to:

- Identify students who need additional support or intervention.

- Determine an instructional focus for each student.

- Determine how to group students appropriately for instruction.

- Plan instruction according to student strengths and needs on an ongoing basis.

- Monitor student progress toward goals.

- Evaluate the outcomes of instruction.

Teachers can use the diagram in Figure 4 to guide the assessment process for secondary students. The elements of this diagram are explained in the first section of this chapter.

FIGURE 4. GUIDE TO READING ASSESSMENT FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS.

Administer beginning of the year (BOY) assessments, consisting of screening measures and diagnostic assessments.

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Use diagnostic assessments to group students and determine an instructional focus.

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Set short-term goals with students.

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Monitor progress of each student receiving intervention to determine any needed changes to grouping or instructional focus.

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Adapt instructional content, activities, materials and delivery of instruction when needed.

Conduct middle of the year (MOY) assessments.

Conduct end of the year (EOY) outcome assessments.

In the early elementary grades, **screening measures**, brief assessments that focus on the critical skills of reading, are usually administered at the beginning of the school year to all students to determine which students may require **interventions**. Often, screening assessments provide the first opportunity for teachers in the primary grades to identify potential struggling readers. When teachers determine through screening measures that a student needs intervention, they may decide to conduct more in-depth assessments so that they can analyze a student's strengths and needs to guide instructional decisions. These more detailed assessments are called **diagnostic assessments**.

Since students in middle and high school have already been through the elementary grades, they may begin the school year already identified by the school district as struggling readers. Many reading teachers in the upper grades already know that their students are struggling readers when the students are assigned to their classes. Typically, middle school struggling readers are identified when they fail to demonstrate adequate reading comprehension proficiency on high-stakes tests or standardized achievement tests. When struggling readers are identified at the end of the school year, schools can make decisions about scheduling accordingly. Schools also screen any new students who come into the school district after school has started. Although secondary teachers might not need to administer screening measures to decide who needs reading support, it is still important for them to conduct diagnostic assessments in order to determine what support students need. Diagnostic assessments can provide teachers valuable information about how to group students and guide instruction.

Progress monitoring measures can be given a minimum of three times a year or as often as once a week using multiple test forms. Use a progress monitoring tracking form and have students chart their own progress toward their goals. Seeing the information will help to determine what goals have been met and to set new goals, if appropriate. Teachers can use the progress monitoring data to determine whether students are making adequate growth and whether instruction needs to be changed.

Between semesters and at the end of the year, determine whether students will need to continue with intervention or change their instructional focus by giving an outcome assessment, such as year-end standardized tests. These measures provide information about whether students met annual benchmarks and mastered objectives at their grade levels. They should reflect the instruction given during the semester/ year. Often, year-end outcome assessments are accountability assessments required by states in order to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act.

THE SEQUENCE OF ASSESSMENT

In the primary grades, teachers typically use assessments that will measure a student's knowledge and skills in **phonological awareness**, the **alphabetic principle**, **letter-sound correspondence**, and word reading. Educators tend to assess young students in a sequence that starts with beginning skills such as letter recognition, sound recognition, and word reading and then progresses along a continuum to more complex skills such as fluency and comprehension (see Figure 5). For example, in kindergarten and first grade, teachers may assess letter-naming ability and phonemic awareness. Being able to rapidly name letters is highly correlated with future reading success (Wagner et al., 1997). **Phonemic awareness**, including the ability to orally segment a word into individual **phonemes** (i.e., saying the sounds in the word *cat* one at a time: /c/ /a/ /t/), is also important for reading progress (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). As students begin to read connected text, primary-grade teachers begin to assess oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. It is important to realize, however, that even though more complex reading behaviors such as comprehension come later in the reading continuum,

instruction in these areas is not delayed until students are proficient readers. For example, listening comprehension strategies can be taught very early as precursors to later reading comprehension strategies.

FIGURE 5. ELEMENTARY SEQUENCE OF ASSESSMENT.

Comprehension

Vocabulary

Fluency

Word Reading/Decoding

Phonemic Awareness
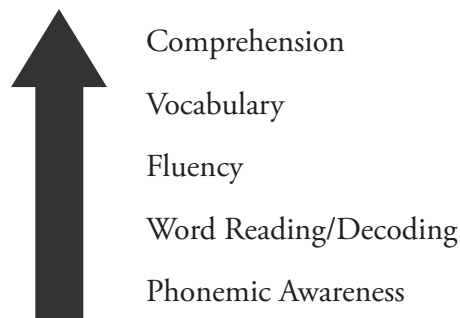
In the upper grades, students are expected to read fluently and accurately so that they can comprehend text. Despite any reading difficulties a secondary student might have, our educational system has expectations that these students will be able to decode fluently and comprehend material with challenging content (McCray et al., 2001). Older students who struggle with reading tend to dislike reading and to read infrequently (Moats, 2001). As a result of reading less, they experience further regression in reading as well as in vocabulary and background knowledge (Stanovich, 1986). Many difficulties for readers who fall behind their peers start as early as the first or second grade. By middle school this gap often widens, and students who should be reading at least 10,000,000 words during the school year may be reading as few as 100,000 words (Lyon, 1997).

Older students may still be struggling with some of the more basic reading elements of decoding and fluency. An older student may "disguise" his or her word-reading difficulties through well-developed sight-word knowledge, but don't let this fool you! Without well-developed decoding skills, a student will only fall further behind as text becomes more complex.

We do, however, tend to give secondary students the benefit of the doubt, and instead of assessing their skills "from the bottom up," as we do in the early grades, we tend to assess them beginning with the most complex skills (see Figure 6). We assess secondary students' oral reading fluency and comprehension to determine whether further assessments are necessary in the area of **word recognition**. As stated in the beginning of this chapter, students in need of reading intervention may first be identified because of their failure to demonstrate competence on state accountability tests or other schoolwide assessments of reading comprehension.

Intervention teachers can assume that most secondary struggling readers have needs in the area of reading comprehension. The question is: Why are students struggling with comprehension? They may lack one or more of the following:

- Effective strategies to help them understand, organize, and remember information.

- Adequate knowledge of word meaning.

- The ability to read fluently enough to understand and remember what they are reading.

- The ability to accurately decode the words.

- Interest or motivation to read.

Each of the above can affect comprehension. For example, students who read very slowly often have difficulty remembering and integrating information from text, and they usually read less than more skilled readers, resulting in limited vocabulary. So if a student has limited comprehension, we assess reading fluency.

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If the student has low fluency, teachers benefit when they probe further to understand issues that may influence the student's fluency development. Is the student in the habit of reading slowly or inaccurately and not monitoring whether the words make sense, or does the student lack fluency because he or she has problems identifying, or decoding, the words in the text? Some students have problems directly related to slow processing of language in general. These students not only read slowly, but also they may have problems retrieving words that they want to say. These students even name objects, letters, and words that they know more slowly than most people. To help answer questions about why a student may read slowly or inaccurately, we may give an assessment of word reading. This may be an assessment of quick recognition of **sight words**, words that are recognized automatically on sight, or it may be an assessment of the student's ability to use phonics to decode unknown words of differing complexity. Both of these domains are assessed if there is an indication that a student has significant problems with decoding.

FIGURE 6. SECONDARY SEQUENCE OF ASSESSMENT.
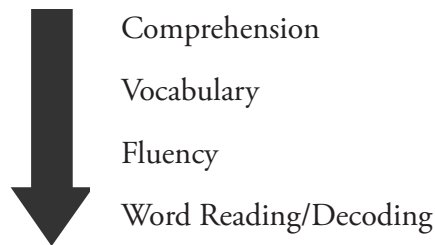
Comprehension

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Appendix, Part 1

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Accuracy Guidelines
# of words read correctly in 1 minute / total # of words read = Accuracy Level
Independent Level
≤ 1 in 20 words is difficult   95%–100% accuracy
Instructional Level
≤ 1 in 10 words is difficult   90%–94% accuracy
Frustration Level
Difficulty with ≥ 1 in 10 words   ≤ 90% accuracy