

Early Reading Screening: Clear Communication

The Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read Inquiry recommended that the province implement universal early screening using evidence-based tools as a means of reducing bias and improving equity.

As Ontario educators and boards collectively learn more about screening, several common questions have emerged. This document aims to provide clear language that systems leaders can use to respond to these questions.

“Early reading screening supports early identification of risks in students’ foundational reading skills, which, if not quickly and appropriately addressed, can be linked to future difficulties with fundamental literacy skills.”

-Ontario Ministry of Education

1. “Why are we screening? This seems like a way of streaming students.”

Universal screening plays a critical role in destreaming education. Screening gives us a reliable and valid indicator of future success. It reduces the risk of bias in assessment and allows us to better align supports to prevent the devastating future impacts of reading failure.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission Right to Read Inquiry concluded that the previous approach to assessment, which often resulted in students being grouped by reading level with tools like PM Benchmarks or the Benchmark Assessment System, contributed to “systemic barriers, such as streaming-like practices, begin as early as kindergarten.”

The Commission concluded that “Universal early screening is not only effective, but also necessary to protect the rights of all students, particularly students from many Code-protected groups. It facilitates early interventions, reduces the potential for bias, and creates better decision-making around student outcomes.”

2. “Why do universal screeners often assess nonsense words? This is the opposite of what we want students to be able to do: read for meaning.”

Nonsense word reading is a powerful way to understand students’ early reading development. To read nonsense words, students must know grapheme-phoneme correspondences and apply them efficiently. When students read nonwords, we see a “pure” measure of their decoding abilities since they cannot rely on context or memorized words. Assessing nonsense word reading **supports** reading for meaning since educators can quickly determine which students need additional support, ensuring all students develop proficient reading that allows for comprehension.

3. “Since we assess nonsense word reading, how much instructional time should be spent teaching students to read nonsense words?”

No instructional time should be used to teach nonsense word reading. We assess nonsense word reading but we do not teach it. Research indicates that automatic word reading involves the linking of a word’s sounds, spellings, and meaning through decoding practice: when we ask students to read nonwords, we take away valuable time that could be spent building real word reading skills.

4. “Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) only measures speed in reading. What about comprehension? Should I screen and then do a PM Benchmark for comprehension?”

Oral reading fluency (ORF) measures both accuracy and rate. These scores provide an indicator or measure of automaticity. When students have good accuracy and rate in reading, we know they have more cognitive capacity to think about what they are reading.

Comprehension is a very complicated construct, and it is challenging to assess in the classroom. Comprehension is not one specific skill, but a complex intersection of many cognitive and linguistic skills and processes. Decades of research show that ORF is very highly correlated with reading comprehension, even more highly correlated than common comprehension assessment practices like questioning or retell. ORF can act as a “proxy” for comprehension since students who are proficient on ORF measures are very likely to be strong comprehenders. There is no need to do a running record-based assessment like a PM Benchmark or DRA in addition to ORF.

5. “How does screening fit with professional judgment?”

Similar to other esteemed professions, professional judgment must be exercised within a standard scope of practice and set of established protocols. The Commission examined the role of professional judgment and concluded that “teachers’ professional judgment must be exercised in the framework of mandated, universal and early screening. Universal screening is needed to meet the needs of students under the Code.”

“Teachers’ professional judgment is not undermined by universal screening.”

- Ontario Human Rights Commission

Screening is just the first step in the assessment of student needs, similar to a temperature and blood pressure check at the doctor’s office. Screening is a fast, efficient, and equitable way to determine which students may be at risk for difficulties and are in need of further assessment. When screening results indicate, based on researched benchmarks or criteria, that a student requires further assessment, a teacher uses their professional judgment to determine what further assessments are required and to plan for instruction and intervention.

6. “Why are there no pictures in the ORF passages?”

ORF passages do not have pictures since we want to assess how students are decoding connected text. Students should not be using pictures or context cues, but instead applying their word reading skills to decode unfamiliar words. Encouraging students to use pictures is encouraging them to use the strategies of poor readers.

7. “Won’t screening mean that more students are labelled as having a learning disability?”

The purpose of screening is not to diagnose students with a learning disability. The goal of screening is to quickly and accurately identify which students are in need of support, and to understand the health of a system’s reading instruction. Screening does not replace professional assessments done by psychologists or speech-language pathologists, but can contribute to a preventative approach that reduces the need for assessments down the road.

8. “Why should I screen all students? I already know who is struggling and I know who are proficient readers.”

With current assessments, we do not have research-supported tools to accurately determine which students are at risk. Many commonly-used reading assessments are not focused on essential early reading skills. The OHRC emphasized that screening is an objective way of reducing bias in education. Screening gives every student a voice, and allows systems to reduce the instance of missing students due to our own assumptions and implicit biases.

The timing of screening also means that we can get an indicator of risk much earlier, even **before** students are taught to read. This is a powerful opportunity for prevention, meaning intervention can be provided before students experience reading difficulty.

Finally, screening provides us with a research-based way to monitor the effectiveness of instruction, both for individual students. As the target skill becomes more complex, screening data allow educators to monitor how students are responding to instruction, and how to adapt instruction to students’ needs across tiers of instruction.

9. “Why screen multilingual learners? It does not seem appropriate.”

There are careful considerations for screening multilingual learners, but it is very much appropriate to screen for early literacy skills. It is important to use an asset-based approach that frames the positive cultural and linguistic knowledge students bring from additional languages. It is also important to understand how students are doing in the essential literacy skills that are necessary to learn to read in English. The multiple forms that are often provided with most screening tools are especially useful in working with multilingual learners; having multiple forms allows educators to use dynamic assessment. They can use many quick checks of a skill over time to understand how students progress in response to instruction. Avoiding static assessments means that educators can investigate whether difficulty with a skill is due to a language difference or a true skill difficulty. Screening can also be augmented with assessment of skills in a student’s home language, where possible, or qualitative analysis of language and literacy in the home language.

10. “Who should screen? Should it be classroom-based educators, or a designated screening team?”

There are different screening models that boards can choose. Classroom-based educators can screen their own students, or boards can use teams to screen all students in a system.

Regardless of the model, it is important that educators who are screening are provided with training. The Commission emphasized that “school boards should make sure staff (for example, teachers) administering the screening tools receive comprehensive, sustained and job-embedded professional learning on the specific screening tool or tools that they will be administering, and on how to interpret the results.”

11. “Why aren’t ORF passages decodable? It doesn’t make sense to give students non-decodable text to read in grade 1.”

ORF is a type of curriculum-based measurement (CBM) which is designed to act as a general outcome measure (GOM). A general outcome measure acts as an overall index of reading performance. ORF’s purpose is not necessarily to show proficiency in reading that one specific passage, but instead to provide a broad indicator of overall reading proficiency, and to predict future reading health.

Educators are often concerned that the ORF passages are too challenging for students, especially in grade 1. It is important to note that the previous practice of classifying text levels at a students’ independent, instructional, or frustration level does not apply here. With ORF, the text difficulty stays constant across a grade level, and students’ accuracy and rate increase across the year. The accuracy goal depends on the specific measure, but it is often lower than 95%.

12. “How is ORF different from the assessments I used to use? They seem very similar.”

ORF can initially appear similar to commonly used assessment tools, like the Benchmark Assessment System, DRA, or PM Benchmarks, but there are several key differences.

Firstly, ORF is a highly researched tool that has decades of support for its use in schools. Most commonly-used ORF screeners have been developed by researchers, and they have been carefully constructed and researched to ensure that they are reliable and valid tools. Most running record-based assessment products are not reliable or valid tools, meaning that we can’t trust the data that are generated. They do not support strong decision-making about instruction and intervention.

Research on the Benchmark Assessment system found that it was only 54% accurate in identifying students in need of support. The authors concluded that using this tool means teachers “will likely be about as accurate as if they flipped a coin.”

Specifically, ORF differs from running record assessments in that there are researched benchmarks or criterion scores at different points in the school year. The texts across a school year stay at a constant level of complexity, but the target for student performance increases across time. With ORF, instead of identifying a reading level, we interpret student scores in relation to this benchmark to understand level of risk at both the student and system level.

13. “Why is there such a big emphasis on timed subtests?”

Many screening measures are timed to provide educators insight into students’ skill automaticity. To be proficient comprehenders, many skills and processes must be orchestrated effortlessly without conscious thought; students are not able to comprehend when word reading is effortful and laboured.
