National Research Center on Learning Disabilities
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Parent Page

What is Progress Monitoring?

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NRCLD developed this brief to help you understand progress monitoring—a scientifically based process of assessing students' performance on a regular basis—and how progress monitoring may be used in your son's or daughter's school.

On Monday, the teacher assigns her class a list of 20 spelling words to learn. On Friday, she tests the students on how well they learned to spell these words. This "mastery measurement" is the traditional way of determining student progress. The next spelling mastery test will indicate mastery of the next week's 20 new words, a new skill. Throughout the year, the teacher will test for different skills in different academic areas. When a math test in November covers one set of skills and a math test the next May covers a different set of skills, these test scores can't be compared. Thus, teachers and parents may be uncertain whether students have maintained the skills taught earlier in the year, and the student's rate of progress can't be described.

Another method of determining student progress, more recently researched, checks how well students are doing through a process called "progress monitoring." Teachers do this monitoring regularly—weekly or monthly—for two reasons. One is to determine whether the students are learning what is being taught. And two, if the students are not learning, then test results will show what instruction is needed to pinpoint and address problem areas.

Research findings suggest that the best method of progress monitoring is Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM). Each CBM test is based on all of the skills that are going to be taught in one school year. For example, a fourth-grader would take a mathematics test in September that contains all of the math concepts he or she should know by the end of the fourth-grade year. This test might include fractions, division, charts, and problem-solving skills. The next month, and in all of the following months, the student would take the same type of test but with different (yet similar) items. The student's scores should be getting higher. If they aren't, teachers will know what instruction needs more focus.

If a teacher, for instance, is testing a student's reading fluency, the teacher will ask a student to read a passage aloud for a certain length of time, often just one minute. The score will be the number of words read correctly. A teacher won't count as correct mispronunciations, substitutions, and missed words. With the resulting information, the teacher will have insight into that student's reading roadblocks.

These CBM tests—often one to five minutes each—are brief. This is so they can be given often and so they don't take valuable time away from instruction. Initially, a student may not be able to finish within the time limit. As more knowledge is acquired, he or she will be able to finish the tests sooner.

Each CBM test is administered to all the students in the same grade. The teacher knows what knowledge is being assessed by these CBM measures and teaches accordingly.

Students' scores are usually displayed in a graph to easily indicate each student's skill progression in

the annual curriculum. If scores keep going up, then the student is learning what he or she needs to know. If the graph line stays the same or goes down, then the student is not benefiting from the instructional program.

Studies have been done that estimate typical student progress. A teacher can use those to compare her or his class to large numbers of students. Besides discovering which individual students need additional help, the teacher can compare her or his class scores to the scores of large numbers of students to measure teaching success or needed adjustments.

So, not only can student scores be used to compare how one student has done on similar class-wide screenings and individual progression to year-end goals, but continuous progress monitoring also shows how a student has benefited from modified instruction and how the student compares to other students in the class or grade level. The scores, too, show teachers how to improve their instruction. Teachers can adjust their methods and use the scores to see what works best for students.

CBM is typically used in the elementary grades to monitor skills such as pre-reading, reading, spelling, mathematics, and written expression. It also has been used to monitor the basic skills of students at the secondary-school level and to measure their mastery of content in subjects such as social studies and science.

CBM BENEFITS

- It's based on the curriculum taught.
- It's easy to administer and grade.
- It doesn't take much time.
- Results can guide instruction
- Teachers make decisions based on numbers, not guesses.
- Results can be used to custom-tailor an individual student's learning plan.
- Research has shown it to be both reliable and valid. Students, for instance, who score high or low on annual state-wide screenings have similar scores on progress monitoring measures.

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