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Consistency in reading assessment in ACT schools

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Summary

This strategy aimed to improve student performance in reading through the use of benchmarks. Benchmarks are assessment and monitoring tools that provide consistent information for designing classroom and school reading programs, and enhance the effective differentiation of teaching.

Four factors were addressed:

1. the need for a consistent approach to the way reading is assessed, and the manner in which benchmarks are assigned to year levels across ACT public primary schools
2. the purpose of reading benchmark assessment in monitoring the growth of individual students to inform planning for differentiated learning
3. an acknowledgement that reading is a complex process, and that assessment of reading involves the analysis of a variety of components of reading, including comprehension, fluency and analysis of reading behaviour
4. the place of reading benchmarks within the broader reading program.

Target student group

This system-wide strategy was implemented in the majority of the ACT Directorate's 68 early childhood, primary and P–10 schools. All K–6 students in the participating schools were involved in reading benchmarking. Running records of their reading performance were kept.

Method

Setting the benchmarks

A Reading Benchmark Working Party, made up of ACT public primary school teachers from schools across the ACT networks, was formed in 2011. Teachers were selected for their expertise in reading, including training in Reading Recovery and a background in working with reading intervention. The working party used comparisons from across the ACT, Australian states and the York District in Ontario, Canada, to agree on a range of consistent numerical reading benchmark levels for primary school, as shown in Table 1.

A range – rather than a single benchmark level – for each year group was agreed on to acknowledge:

- the range of ages and developmental levels across year groups
- the different reading abilities of students depending on text types, background knowledge and the author's writing style.



These levels were based on the PM Benchmark Kit reading levels because of the widespread use of this resource across the ACT. Various other benchmark assessment resources were compared to give teachers choice while still allowing for a consistent approach. A comparison between PM Benchmark Kit reading levels and other sources of reading assessment can be found in the *ACT Education and Training Directorate Reading Benchmark Guidelines*. Contact ACT Education and Training Directorate to read the guidelines. Contact details are provided at the end of this document.

As outlined in this document, it is expected that 90–94 per cent of students will reach or exceed these recommended benchmarks.

Table 1: Recommended benchmarks for foundation to year 3

Year level	Mid-year range	End-of-year range
K	1–3	5–8
1	10–12	14–16
2	16–18	20–22
3	21–23	24–26

Using the benchmarks

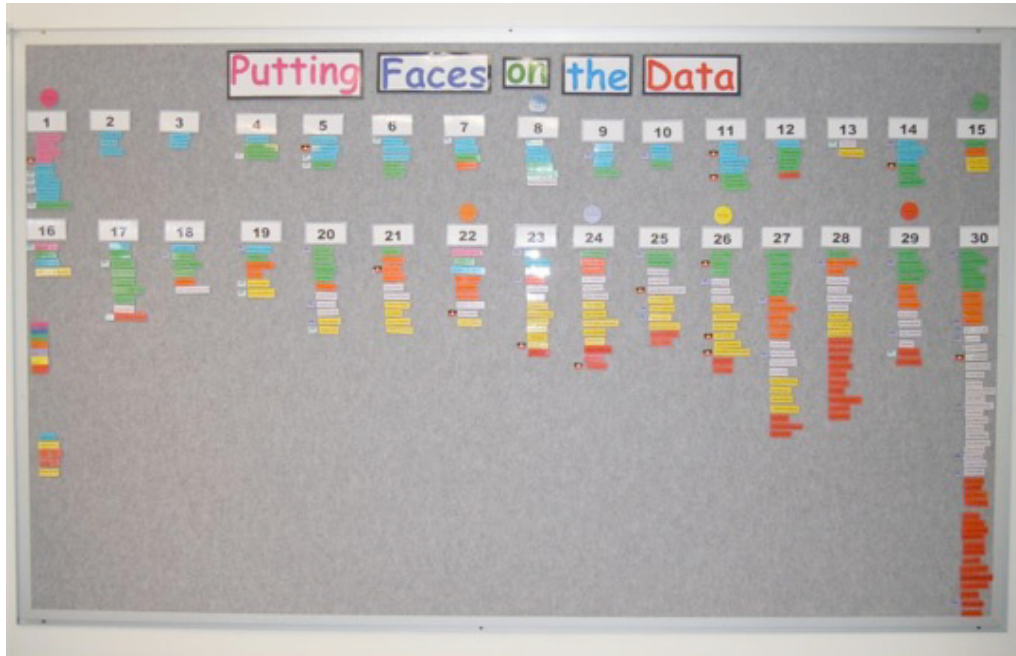
Teachers completed running records for all students in the first few weeks of school. Students who were making progress well above or below expected benchmarks were easily identified, and generated closer attention for enrichment or intervention to differentiate their needs. Students progressing within the expected range did not require assessments as often as those students who were not making expected adequate progress. Kindergarten and EAL/D students were assessed according to need.

Benchmark data was recorded and tracked to provide comparative information on students across the school and to 'put faces on the data'.

Benchmarks were also used as a part of the summative assessment on reading to report to parents and carers on students' progress and achievement.



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A number of schools created data walls by placing individual students' name tags next to their reading levels. The name tags were colour-coded by year level. This provided a visual profile for the school that was then used for resource allocation and whole-school tracking of student performance.

Results

Kindergarten teachers at Latham Primary School undertook an action-learning project that asked:

- How can Latham Primary School improve reading outcomes for kindergarten students in the bottom 10 per cent, in order for them to achieve or exceed ACT Reading Benchmarks?
- How can Latham Primary School build staff capacity to teach reading successfully for all kindergarten students?
- This goal – to improve student reading – was made explicit through the school strategic plan. Professional learning centred on building teacher capacity in teaching reading. Additional funding was provided for reading resources, particularly high-quality books.



Considerable progress was made between 2010 and 2012 towards the recommended target of 90 per cent of students meeting or exceeding the benchmark, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage of Latham Primary School mainstream students meeting or exceeding ACT Reading Benchmarks

Year	Time of year	Reading benchmark	2010	2012
Foundation	End of year	5~8	56%	77%
Year 1	End of year	14~16	63%	89%
Year 2	End of year	20~22	86%	89%

Latham Primary School's NAPLAN data supported the improvement indicated by the ACT Reading Benchmarks. The school target of increasing the percentage of students in bands 4, 5 and 6 by 3 per cent, and of decreasing the percentage of students in bands 1, 2 and 3 by 3 per cent annually, was exceeded every year from 2009 to 2012. From 2009 to 2012, the mean annual increase was 10 per cent and the decrease was 12 per cent.

Lessons learned

One of the main factors that contributed to the success of this initiative was the development of a consistent approach to reading assessment, with whole-school training and implementation across all classes being required. A data-collection and tracking system needs to be developed and used by all staff, and this includes an assessment timetable to monitor progress. A common resource in the form of levelled texts – for example, a PM Benchmarking Kit – is necessary for each school, and multiple sets of resources would be advisable in large schools.

While commercially available products provide a convenient source of levelled benchmark books, they are not the only source of benchmark texts. Any book that consistently provides the right balance of support and challenge for students at the appropriate developmental stage could be used as a benchmark book.



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Research base

Reading benchmarks form an integral component of reading assessment in ACT public primary schools. The *ACT Education and Training Directorate Reading Benchmark Guidelines* were developed to provide schools with a consistent way of monitoring and measuring students' reading performance and progress.

The definition of a benchmark is a standard against which to measure something (Fountas & Pinell 2010). Reading benchmarks in the ACT context provide a measure to monitor individual student growth in reading and to 'put faces on the data' for whole-school tracking and accountability (Sharratt & Fullan 2012).

Reading benchmarks can be assigned to readers based on a running record taken of a levelled text. A running record provides an analysis of reading behaviour during oral reading. This allows the teacher to understand the reading practices and strategies used by the reader, as well as their level of comprehension. Information about reading comprehension and analysis of the reader's practice during reading provides an understanding of the reader's ability and their learning needs.

Further reading and links

ACT Education and Training Directorate 2012, *ACT Education and Training Directorate Reading Benchmark Guidelines*, Canberra

Clay M 2000, *Running Records For Classroom Teachers*, Heinemann, Auckland

Fountas I & Pinell G 2010, *A Guide to Benchmark Assessment System 1*, Pearson Australia, Port Melbourne

Sharratt L & Fullan M 2012, *Putting Faces on the Data: What Great Leaders Do!*, Corwin, London

Contacts

ACT Education and Training Directorate
Judy Moore judy.moore@act.gov.au