

Benchmark Education *Phonics Skill Bags* Research Foundation and Results

Introduction

Phonics Skill Bags are the research-based explicit solution for phonics instruction in an intervention setting. Phonics instruction for a wide range of phonetic skills is provided in individual skill bags so teachers can pinpoint students' individual needs and teach accordingly. The Quick Phonics Assessment kit, developed by Jan Hasbrouck, PhD, is included for pre- and post-assessment.

The *Phonics Skill Bags* are for students in Grades K–6 who need targeted small-group support or intervention. Each bag has everything needed by a teacher to teach one skill. There are three kits containing different sets of *Phonics Skill Bags*:

- *StartUp Phonics* is the beginning level which provides explicit, extended beginning instruction in letter discrimination and identification, and consonant, short and long vowel sound/symbol relationships. The first 50 lessons of *StartUp Phonics* target phonological awareness and letter awareness.
- *BuildUp Phonics* is the extending level that starts with a review of short vowels and consonants then continues with explicit extended instruction in initial and final blends and clusters, long vowels, digraphs, variant vowels, and diphthongs, and finishes with soft and silent letters.
- *SpiralUp Phonics* is the advanced level that addresses advanced phonetic elements, syllable spelling patterns, advanced phonetic elements using multisyllabic word-solving strategies, and word study elements to strengthen vocabulary development.

This document will provide a closer look at the foundational research upon which the program is grounded. A review of the *Phonics Skill Bags* by the University of Oregon will be presented. This document finishes with results reporting, followed by a references and bibliography section.

Why Teach Explicit Phonemic Awareness and Phonics?

A good reader is like a builder who can reach into a toolbox of familiar tools and pull out the right tool at the right moment. Like tools, each reading skill or strategy has an important use in the complex, cognitive process of reading. There are two related sets of skills needed to develop literacy, foundational reading skills and reading comprehension skills. *Phonics Skill Bags* focus on the foundational reading skills, but also provide opportunities for practicing those skills in authentic contexts.

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear and orally manipulate sounds in spoken language. It includes the following abilities: recognizing there are words within sentences, hearing rhyming units within words, hearing syllables within words, and hearing and manipulating phonemes within words. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that individual sounds of spoken language work together to make words. Children who have phonemic awareness skills are likely to have an easier time learning to read and spell.

Phonics instruction focuses on teaching students the relationships between the sounds of the letters and the written symbols. In phonics instruction, students are taught to use these relationships to read, write, and spell words. Phonics instruction assumes that these sound/symbol relationships are systematic and predictable and that knowing these relationships will help students read words that are new or novel.

Phonics Skill Bags builds a foundation for successful phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics instruction using appropriate activities, moving along a progression from easier to harder activities. There is strong evidence (Foorman et al., 2016) that students benefit from development of awareness of the sounds of speech and how the letters link together. There is also strong evidence (Foorman et al.) that students benefit from being taught to decode words, analyze word parts, and to write and recognize words.

Instructional Programming

The *Phonics Skill Bags* provide daily instruction for 20 to 30 minutes with a 5-day cycle per targeted skill area. Lessons build sequentially and include an ongoing spiral review of previously taught skills. Opportunities to engage in active, hands-on, multi-modal activities connect explicitly-taught skills in the context of reading, writing, and spelling.

There is moderate evidence (Foorman et al., 2016) that students benefit when given the opportunity to read connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Toward that recommendation, the *Phonics Skill Bags* provide authentic reading materials to allow frequent opportunities to apply the phonics skills being learned. The decodable texts have been carefully written so that only phonics elements that students have learned and practiced appear in the books. A very limited number of sight words are also used in the texts. New sight words are always explicitly taught before they appear in students' decodable text reading. Previously-taught sight words are also reviewed. Students have opportunities to read fiction and nonfiction titles.

Assessment

Assessment should be used for multiple purposes, including helping teachers determine what students know or need to be taught during the learning process. Information gathered through assessments allows for the modification of teaching and learning activities, ensuring student needs are met. There are multiple assessments provided with the *Phonics Skill Bags*, including formative, diagnostic, and summative. These assess phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, and word study skills.

- **Quick Phonics Assessment.** The Quick Phonics Assessment pinpoints the letter-sound associations and spelling patterns students must know to efficiently decode words. This assessment can be used to determine students' proficiency in specific phonics skills.
- **Pre-Post Assessments.** The Pre-Post Assessments cover all the skills taught in the kit. The assessment is administered one-on-one and shows progress across the implementation.
- **Quick-Checks.** The Quick-Check assessments, provided for every unit, are administered after the last day of instruction and include words to segment and blends and sight words to read. As teachers analyze students' responses, the skills or words that give student the most difficulty

should be noted, and further practice could be provided, if necessary, in the small-group activities in each unit.

- **Reading Rate Assessment.** After students practice a selected decodable passage throughout the week, teachers can listen to them read one-on-one and assess their fluency using the provided rubric.
- **Informal Observation.** In addition to the Quick-Check and Reading Rate Assessments, it is recommended informal observations be used to note whether students are mastering skills. Throughout the units, teacher assessments tips are provided.

Summary of the University of Oregon’s Review

In 2003, the University of Oregon formed a panel to review supplemental and intervention programs according to the criteria established for Reading First and scientifically-based reading research, as defined by the *National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The following is their summary of the criterion for the *StartUp Phonics* and *BuildUp Phonics* kits.

Decision Point: Meets criteria for a supplemental program

Targeted Instruction of the Essential Skill Areas: Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

Targeted Instruction for the Following Grades: K-3

Summary of Scored Criterion:

1. Phonemic Awareness

- Teaches skills explicitly
- Models phonemic awareness tasks and responses orally and follows with students’ production of task
- Progresses from the easier phonemic awareness activities to the more difficult (e.g., isolation, blending, segmentation, and manipulation)
- Incorporates letters into phonemic awareness activities
- Makes students’ cognitive manipulations of sounds overt by using auditory cues or manipulatives that signal movement of one sound to the next
- Analyzes words at the phoneme level
- In Kindergarten, focus is on first the initial sound, then on final sound, and lastly on the medial sound in words. In Grade 1, focus is on phonemes in all positions.
- Focuses beginning phonemic level instruction on short words
- Works with increasingly longer words and expands beyond consonant words to more complex phonemic structures
- Focuses appropriate amount of daily time on blending, segmenting, and manipulating tasks until proficient

2. Phonics

- Introduces high-utility letter sound instruction early in the sequence instead of low-utility letter sounds

- Sequences the introduction of letter sounds, letter combinations, and word parts in combinations, and word parts in ways that minimize confusion
- Incorporated frequent and cumulative review of taught letter sounds to increase automaticity
- Models instruction at each of the fundamental stages
- Introduces regular words for which students know all the letter sounds
- Progresses systematically from simple word types, word lengths, and word complexity to more complex words
- Incorporates spelling to reinforce word analysis; after students can read words, provides explicit instruction in spelling, showing students how to map the sounds of letters on the print
- Provides teacher-guided practice in controlled work lists and connected text in which students can apply their newly learned skills successfully
- Brings instruction in word families, word patterns, and larger orthographic units after students have learned the letter-sound correspondence in the unit
- Teaches students to process larger highly represented patterns to increase fluency in word recognition
- Teaches advanced phono-analysis skills explicitly, first in isolation, then in words and connected text, and utilizes other program materials when students are proficient
- Teaches explicit strategy to read multisyllabic words by using prefixed, suffixes, and known word parts

3. Phonics—Irregular Words

- Select words that have high utility
- Controls the number of irregular words introduced at a time
- Separated highly similar words for initial instruction
- Preteaches sight words and incorporates them into connected text
- Provides ample practice and cumulative review of important high-frequency sight words

Summary of Reviewers' Comments

- “Well organized.”
- “Good use of modeling, particularly with blending activities.”
- “Program is explicit and provides opportunities for teacher to work more with children if they need more support.”
- “Does a nice job of helping teacher effectively structure classroom and class activities to best support student needs.”
- “Nice use of controlled text to practice skills.”

Results Reporting

Supplemental programs are less often the central focus in effectiveness studies. Supplemental programs generally do not serve all participants across the school day. In the case of the *Phonics Skill Bags*, the students who would receive this type of instruction (Tier II) would also be receiving instruction during the English Language Arts block (Tier I).

Benchmark Education Company prefers to study results in authentic classroom and school settings during the course of a regular school day rather than imposing an artificial instructional environment. As a result, the results reported in this document will include a mixture of environments and programs where we would be able to obtain results. The common theme is progress made by students who received instruction using the *Phonics Skill Bags*.

Arkansas Reading First

In 2003, the Arkansas State Board of Education placed the *Phonics Skill Bags*, known then as *Phonetic Connections*, onto their Reading First list of approved programs. During the 2003–04 school year, 54 of the 67 Reading First schools (81%) in the state used *StartUp* and *BuildUp* in their K-3 classrooms. Five schools (7%) used another phonemic/phonics program and eight schools (12%) chose to not use any program. The following are some of the results for the schools using the *Phonics Skill Bags*.

- Seventy-five percent of kindergarten students met or exceeded the Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) goal by the end of the year, based on the DIBELS assessment.
- The percentage of 1st grade students who achieved the goal for the DIBELS Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF) measure went from 19% of students at the beginning of the year to 89% of students at the end of the year.
- Seventy-three percent of 1st grade students reached the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) goal by the end of the year.
- Of the 608 students in the 1st grade who were in the Well Below Benchmark or At Risk category based on the DIBELS ORF, 389 (64%) students had moved out of the At Risk category by the end of the year. Eleven schools were successful in moving all of their original At Risk students out of this category by the end of the school year.
- The Arkansas Reading First schools using the *Phonics Skill Bags* outperformed schools with similar socioeconomic and academic characteristics that were not Reading First schools. The schools using the *Phonics Skill Bags* had 10 to 19% more students at each grade level scoring at or above the benchmark goal on the DIBELS ORF measure than did comparison schools.

Phonics and Word Study Use in a School District in the Midwest

When piloting the Benchmark Education *Phonics Skill Bags*, it became obvious to this district that even the on-level students, according to the DRA assessment, had deficiencies in their understanding and skill level in phonics and word study. The decision was made to implement the *Phonics Skill Bags* and *Word Study and Vocabulary Skill Bags*. Using AIMSweb and DRA measures, gains were demonstrated for students in the Kindergarten and 1st grades.

- At the winter administration of the DRA for all Kindergarten students, 83% of students across the district were at or above expected DRA levels, indicating students were on grade-level.

- Comparing the AIMSweb’s Letter Sound Fluency measure outcomes for the years before and after implementing the *Phonics Skill Bags* (Table 1), the growth across the school year and Letter Sounds Correct (LSC) per week achieved by kindergarten students both exceeded the target.

Table 1. AIMSweb Letter Sound Fluency Results for Kindergarten Students Before and After Implementation of Phonics Skill Bags

Group	Fall	Winter	Spring	LSC/Week	Growth
Target	2	20	33	0.9	31
Before Implementation	8.5	28.2	35.8	0.8	27.3
After Implementation	7.9	30.8	42.1	1.0	34.2

- Comparing the AIMSweb’s Phoneme Segmentation Fluency measure outcomes for the years before and after implementing the *Phonics Skill Bags* (Table 2), the growth across the school year and Phonemes Correct (PC) per week achieved by 1st grade students both exceeded the target.

Table 2. AIMSweb Phoneme Segmentation Fluency Results for 1st Students Before and After Implementation of Phonics Skill Bags

Group	Fall	Winter	Spring	LSC/Week	Growth
Target	41	51	55	0.4	14
Before Implementation	34.4	34.7	41.5	0.2	7.1
After Implementation	26.7	43.5	47.7	0.6	21.0

Ft. Smith, Arkansas

Benchmark Education’s *Phonics Skill Bags* and *Word Study and Vocabulary Skill Bags* were used in a study conducted by Main Street Academics during the 2011–2012 school year as part of the *Benchmark Literacy* program resources (see Figure 1). Six elementary schools were chosen to participate in the study, three used *Benchmark Literacy* program and resources and three continued using other literacy programs.

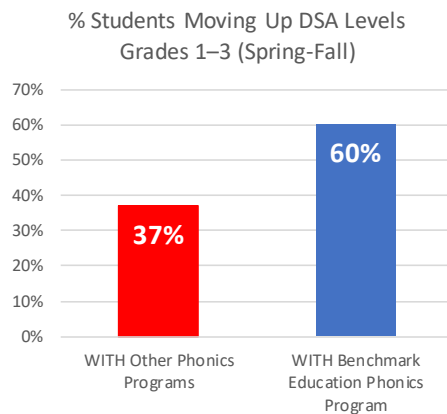


Figure 1. Ft. Smith, Arkansas Students in Main Street Academics Study

Figure 1 shows 60% of students in the 1st to 3rd grades using *Benchmark Literacy’s* Phonics and Word Study programs moved up at least one DSA level from fall to spring administrations compared to only 37% of students using other literacy programs.

Fairfax, Virginia

In another study conducted by Main Street Academics during the 2011–2012 school year, the *Benchmark Literacy* program resources included the *Phonics Skill Bags*, including *StartUp*, *BuildUp*, and *SpiralUp*, and the *Word Study and Vocabulary Skill Bags*, including *Start*, *Build*, *Spiral*, and *Extend*. Two schools were involved in this study, one introduced the *Benchmark Literacy* program and the comparison school used other literacy programs from other publishers.

- For 1st and 2nd grade students using the *Benchmark Literacy* program and resources, average DRA level growth was 13.0, compared to 10.6 DRA Levels for the comparison group. The effect size for 1st grade students, beginning to the end of the school year, was $d^2 = 0.60$ and $d = 0.70$ for 2nd grade students.
- For students in 3rd to 6th grades who used the *Benchmark Literacy* program and resources, the average DRA level growth was 8.8 across the school year, compared to level growth of 5.7 for students using other literacy programs. The average effect size across the 3rd to 6th grades for students using the *Benchmark Literacy* program and resources was $d = 0.70$.

Dissertation Review: Targeted Instruction for Struggling Readers: It Takes a Team

Richburg-Burgess, J. (2012). *Targeted instruction for struggling readers: It takes a team* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3530073)

Introduction

Richburg-Burgess (2012) “investigated and documented the implementation of this new model which was designed for second and third grade struggling readers with assessed needs in decoding and fluency” (p. vi). A large part of this implementation was the creation of a professional learning community (PLC) intervention team. The other part was the intervention instruction that included explicit phonics instruction, sight word development, and fluency instruction during a 30 minute a day intervention period.

The intervention instruction included explicit phonics instruction using Benchmark Education’s *BuildUp* and *SpiralUp Phonetic Connections* as well as Benchmark Education’s *Reader’s Theater* for fluency and comprehension. These two programs were used in a seven-week cycle, with the *Phonetic Connections* being taught five days a week for 30 minutes a day for six weeks and the *Reader’s Theater* used on the seventh as a fluency activity. Other independent reading activities were part of the implementation that occurred outside the intervention period.

Results

Assessments used to qualify students for the intervention and monitor progress over time included the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency Assessment and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). Of the original 34 students in 2nd and 3rd grade who qualified for the program, 28 students completed the program. Of the 28 students, 15 were in 2nd grade and 13 were in 3rd grade. Twenty-seven of the students were African American and one was Latino.

¹ Effect sizes are based on Cohen (1988). An effect size of $d = 0.2$ is considered small, $d = 0.5$ is medium, and $d = 0.8$ is large.

Richburg-Burgess stated “results revealed that [DIBELS] posttest scores (M=67.10, SD=18.97) were significantly higher than [DIBELS] pretest scores (M=37.53, SD=9.93) for students in the program ($t(27) = 10.98, p < .001$)” (p. 106). Additionally, 35 percent of the participants achieved the goal of gaining at least 36 to 38 words correct per minute on the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency Assessment.

Students, according to Richburg-Burgess, also made progress by “increasing their instructional reading level as indicated by the DRA results and the grade equivalent level” (p. 117). Eighty-seven percent of 2nd graders met the goal of moving at least one grade level in reading and 62 percent of 3rd graders moved at least one grade level in reading.

Surveys of the members of the PLC and of students was also undertaken by Richburg-Burgess. Of particular interest were students’ responses to the *Phonetic Connections* instruction and the *Reader’s Theater*. Students almost unanimously indicated they wanted to continue the Cupcake Reader’s Theater. It was called Cupcake Reader’s Theater because student received cupcakes and a beverage after the performances. Students liked the stories, the opportunity to participate, and the opportunity to perform and watch performances.

Regarding the small group instruction, 75 percent of the students indicated they liked small group instruction. There was a favorable reaction to the materials used in small group by 70 percent of students. The building words activity with manipulatives was enjoyed by 68 percent of students. Overall, Richburg-Burgess states, “the students rated their small group targeted instruction sessions as a positive experience with which they wanted to continue to be a part of for the next year” (p. 118).

Summary

This study combined the use of a PLC Intervention Team with targeted instruction using *Phonetic Connections* and *Reader’s Theater* in a seven-week cycle across the school year. Both parts of this study were necessary for the progress of the students in the study. Richburg-Burgess presents a compelling story for establishing a successful program to help struggling students.

Thesis Review: Effective Methods of Instruction to Increase Phonics Achievement of Kindergarteners
Driscoll, B. (2014). *Effective methods of instruction to increase phonics achievement of kindergarteners* (Unpublished master’s thesis). Retrieved from https://mdsoar.org/bitstream/handle/11603/2327/MEd_Driscoll_actionres_Sp2014.pdf?sequence=1

Introduction

Driscoll (2014) stated “the purpose of this study was to determine if the method of instruction has an effect on the phonics achievement of kindergarten students” (p. ii). The first method of instruction focused on learning letter names first and then later in the school year learning letter sounds. The second method was to receive instruction which taught letter names and letters sounds simultaneously throughout the duration of the study, approximately four to five months during the first half of the school year.

Students were identified as needing additional instruction based on the DIBLES 6th Edition Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) scores at the beginning of the school year. Two groups of students across two academic school years were formed. One included eight students and was taught using the Open Court phonics curriculum where letter names where the focus for the first part of the school year. The second

group included seven students and was taught using the Benchmark Education phonics curriculum, better known as the *Phonics Skill Bags*, where letter names and sounds were taught simultaneously. Both groups of students received similar whole group instruction, with the difference in the small group instruction.

Results

Two measures were used to determine results, LNF with scores at the beginning of the year and middle of the year, and Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) given only at the middle of the year in this study. The LNF results were not significantly different between the groups because the mid-year scores, 28.63 for the Open Court phonics group and 28.86 for the Benchmark Education phonics group, were nearly identical. The Benchmark Education phonics group gained 27.72 letters, on average, compared to the Open Court group that gained 24.88 letters. Additionally, the Benchmark Education group started Well Below Benchmark or in the At Risk status and reached the Benchmark or Low Risk status by mid-year, while the Open Court group started at Below Benchmark or Some Risk and finished at Benchmark or Low Risk.

For the NWF measure, there was a statistically significant difference in the mid-year average scores of the two groups, $t(13) = -2.249, p < .05$, in favor of the Benchmark Education phonics group where both the letters and letter sounds were taught simultaneously. The mean for the Open Court group was 7.38 correct letter sounds, with a status of Below Benchmark or Some Risk. The mean for the Benchmark Education group was 16.0 correct letter sounds, with a status of Benchmark or Low Risk.

Summary

One of the implications for teaching both letters and associated letter sounds simultaneously is students can more quickly read and write words, using blending, segmenting, and decoding, as part of the whole group lesson. Driscoll found there was no difference in the skill of letter identification based on the different methods of instruction, but that there was a significant difference in the association between letters and letter sounds based on method of instruction. Driscoll states “from this study, it appears that teaching letter names and letter sounds simultaneously is the most effective for teaching letter sounds, but this method does not provide significant results in letter naming” (p. 25).

Phonics Skill Bags Summary

This report combines several elements useful in evaluating the *Phonics Skill Bags*. First a brief description of the program and the kit levels helped to set the stage. Then a discussion of what the foundational research suggests is appropriate instruction is presented. This research is matched to the appropriate parts of the *Phonics Skill Bags*. A review completed by the University of Oregon identifies the strengths of the *Phonics Skill Bags*. This is followed by a series of results reports. The *Phonics Skill Bags* have been studied in a variety of settings, including: when it was on a state list of approved programs in Arkansas; by a district in the Midwest; by the independent research company called Main Street Academics in Ft. Smith, Arkansas and Fairfax, Virginia; and finally, in studies by teachers working on their doctoral dissertation and master’s thesis.

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