

# Sunshine Phonics Digital Decodables

## Promising Early Results from an Implementation Study

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*Research Conducted by WestEd*

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## Executive Summary

Recent assessments, including the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, reveal a troubling decline in elementary grade reading proficiency, with notable achievement gaps across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). In response, educators and policymakers are advocating for targeted interventions, quality instructional materials, and teacher professional development aligned with scientific evidence of effective literacy instruction to bridge these proficiency gaps.

Decodable books are essential in phonics instruction as they provide learners with a structured environment in which to apply their phonetic decoding skills, aligning closely with taught phonics rules to reinforce phonological awareness (Adams, 1990). Designed to incrementally increase in complexity, these books help build students' confidence and skill by progressing from simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words to more complex phonetic patterns, fostering automatic word recognition crucial for fluency (Stanovich, 1986). As students master decoding,

decodable books also facilitate the integration of comprehension skills, transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn. Scientific research of effective reading instruction suggests that when combined with other reading materials, these practices promote overall reading development (Foorman et al., 2016).

This report describes an evaluation and its findings from the Sunshine Phonics Digital Decodables (SPDD) implementation study, conducted by

### Key Findings

- Teachers emphasized the quality and diverse content of the Sunshine Phonics Digital Decodable books.
- The recording feature allowed teachers to monitor progress and growth and also aided students in self-correction.
- First grade students with high usage of the program demonstrated significant growth in DIBELS scores.
- The consistency of the program format helped emergent readers build confidence and phonics skills.

WestEd during the fall of 2024. The research aimed to assess typical SPDD implementation, student engagement, and its influence on foundational literacy skills. The study involved 25 students from three English Learner (EL) classrooms in an urban school in the United States, with participants selected based on their initial Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores. Students used SPDD for 45–60 minutes weekly, with a personalized starting point. Data collection comprised SPDD usage, DIBELS scores, teacher interviews, and classroom observations.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to describe how teachers and students in primary grades benefit from using SPDD. A mixed-method descriptive design was employed, utilizing observations and interviews to document teacher implementation of SPDD and pre-post assessments to track student knowledge and skills. Teachers allocated daily 30-minute SPDD sessions, supplemented with paper-based activities. Qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources were integrated to answer key research questions.

## **Key Findings**

Teachers had positive impressions of SPDD, especially appreciating the high content quality and ability to support students' independent phonics practice. Students demonstrated increased engagement and motivation in learning phonemes and graphemes especially through the recording feature, which supported student self-correction and enabled teachers to monitor progress and growth. Observations indicated growth in student confidence and skill application, with increased independence over the study duration.

Students demonstrated increased engagement and motivation, leading to growth in DIBELS scores, especially among first and third graders. First graders improved across various metrics, phonemic awareness and phonics

skills, while third graders showed gains in reading fluency and comprehension.

## **Conclusion**

The study found that both teachers and students benefited from the SPDD program. Teachers reported positively on the SPDD's content quality and its effectiveness in facilitating independent phonics practice. Students were engaged and motivated with the program, particularly enjoying interactive features like the recording option which promoted self-correction and skill monitoring. Improvements were observed in DIBELS scores, with first-grade students showing advances in phonemic awareness and phonics skills and third-grade students enhancing their reading fluency and comprehension. Overall, SPDD was found to foster these students' confidence, independence, and foundational literacy skills, highlighting its effectiveness as a supplemental phonics program for English Learner students.

## Introduction

Recent assessments highlight a concerning trend in elementary grade reading proficiency, with a substantial proportion of students not meeting proficiency standards. Persistent achievement gaps exist across different demographic groups, including racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading results, for example, showed a decline in average scores compared to previous years, signaling challenges in reading comprehension and literacy skills among students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025).

To address these issues, educators and policymakers are emphasizing the need for targeted and evidence-based interventions, increased access to quality instructional materials in foundational reading skills (e.g., phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, language and vocabulary, and comprehension skills), and professional development for teachers focused on effective literacy instruction. These efforts aim to bridge the gaps in reading proficiency and ensure that all students have the opportunity to achieve literacy success.

Decodable books play a pivotal role in phonics instruction by providing learners with the opportunity to apply their phonetic decoding skills in a controlled reading environment. These texts are composed of words that align closely with the phonics rules students have been taught, allowing them to practice decoding words without relying on memorization or guessing. Scientific research of effective reading instruction emphasizes that systematic phonics instruction, which includes the use of decodable books, supports the development of proficient reading skills (Ehri et al., 2001). By concentrating on phoneme-grapheme correspondences, decodable books help in reinforcing the phonological awareness crucial for early reading development (Adams, 1990).

Decodable books are designed to align with the incremental nature of phonics instruction, each book gradually increasing in complexity as students master more phonetic patterns. For instance, children might start with simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words and progress to more complex structures involving consonant blends and digraphs. This scaffolded approach not only builds confidence in young readers but also ensures that their decoding skills are solidified before they encounter more irregular words. According to Stanovich (1986), this structured exposure is crucial because it fosters automaticity in word recognition, which is a cornerstone of fluent reading.

In addition, while decodable books provide valuable practice for phonics, they also pave the way for the integration of comprehension skills. Once students can decode words with ease, they can focus more on understanding the text, which is the ultimate goal of reading. Thus, decodable books serve as an essential bridge from learning to read to reading to learn. When used effectively, alongside other reading materials, they can contribute significantly to a balanced literacy program that supports all aspects of reading development (Foorman et al., 2016).

## Overview of the Study

The Sunshine Phonics Digital Decodables (SPDD) program is a supplementary phonics program offering 180 fiction and nonfiction books, organized into eight sets. The digital texts are also available in print format. Each set of books focuses on specific phonemes or sounds, providing students multiple opportunities to practice, record, and listen to each new sound and word, and read and record a story on a personal device. Extension activities and Teachers' Books—resources which provide book-by-book teaching notes—are available in print format. The print and digital programs can be used together to complement<sup>1</sup> each other. The research study only focused on the digital decodable books. A separate early literacy digital game is also available using the same Sunshine Phonics content.

WestEd partnered with Wendy Pye Publishing Ltd to explore the relationship of the use of SPDD on phonemic awareness and phonics achievement among emergent readers with limited English print and alphabet knowledge. Conducted in the fall of 2024, the study aimed to understand the typical implementation of SPDD in English Learner (EL) and early elementary grades. WestEd collected data on teachers' impressions, SPDD implementation, and student performance.

This report describes the implementation study, focusing on the usability and feasibility of SPDD in English Learner classrooms in the United States. The research questions explored include:

1. What are the characteristics of typical implementation of Sunshine Phonics Digital Decodables in English Learner classrooms?
2. Are students able to use the program as intended?

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<sup>1</sup> The print program, which was not used in this study, provides more options for explicit teaching.

3. What modifications to program features would improve initial use and continued engagement by teachers and students?
4. What is the association between student use of the program and changes in foundational literacy skills?

The study was conducted over 10 weeks in the fall of the 2024–25 school year to explore the implementation and impact of SPDD in increasing students’ foundational literacy skills—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

Participants included grades 1–3 emergent readers with limited English print and alphabet knowledge who independently used the program for about 45–60 minutes per week. Each student started at a personalized point in SPDD, determined by their teacher’s assessment of their phonics and reading skills. Teachers received one-hour of virtual professional development on how to use and implement SPDD from the Sunshine Phonics team.

Students were invited to participate in the study based on their Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores. Participants were situated in large urban areas, including a high percentage of students from low-income families, including ELs from diverse populations.

Data were collected from the SPDD platform and the school provided DIBELS data from the beginning and midyear points, with the initial scores determining students’ program eligibility and starting points. Researchers observed students using SPDD and interviewed teachers after the observations about their perceptions and implementation characteristics.



## Methodology

### Design

WestEd utilized a mixed-method descriptive study design to evaluate the usability and feasibility of the program and a pre-post design, without a comparison group, to describe student use and growth. The pre-post design allowed researchers to assess changes in the students' knowledge and skills over the study period. While this design is not as robust as randomized controlled trials for establishing causality, pre-post designs can provide preliminary evidence of a correlation between the intervention and outcomes. Therefore, relationships between student use and student growth are intended to be exploratory and not interpreted as causal.

### Sample

The school's leadership team and teachers chose to include grade 1–3 students but opted not to include kindergarten students due to their language abilities and gross motor skills, believing SPDD might be too challenging for their students at the beginning of the year. The sample consisted of three EL classrooms, with a total of 25 students from one school in an urban area in the eastern region of the United States.

### Implementation of SPDD

Teachers were asked to use SPDD with their students every day for 30 minutes a day,<sup>2</sup> supplementing the digital program with the complementary, paper-based Activity Sheets. EL students were pulled out to work with their EL teachers before returning to their regular classrooms for other instruction.

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<sup>2</sup> One teacher mentioned working with EL students in 90-minute blocks.

## Data Sources

This descriptive study utilized data from multiple sources to understand the classroom implementation of SPDD by teachers, student usage and responses to the program, teacher recommendations, and progression of students’ foundational reading skills over the study period. To answer our research questions, we used a combination of rich qualitative data from teachers, student program use, and assessment data sources. Table 1 summarizes the types of data collected from participants over the course of the study and the research questions that each source addressed.

**Table 1. Types of data collected from participants**

Data Source	Research Question Addressed	Source(s)
<b>SPDD – Number of books completed</b>	RQ 4: Association between SPDD use and changes in foundational literacy skills	Student
<b>SPDD – Number of logins</b>	RQ 4: Association between SPDD use and changes in foundational literacy skills	Student
<b>DIBELS</b>	RQ 4: Association between SPDD use and changes in foundational literacy skills	Student
<b>Teacher Interview</b>	RQ 1: Characteristics of implementation RQ 2: Students’ use of SPDD RQ 3: Suggestions for continued engagement	Teacher
<b>Observation</b>	RQ 1: Characteristics of implementation RQ 2: Students’ use of SPDD RQ 3: Suggestions for continued engagement	Teacher & Students

*Note.* RQ = Research Question; DIBELS = Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.

## Teacher Interview

WestEd developed a teacher interview protocol focusing on key areas such as teachers' impressions of SPDD, implementation practices, and teachers' observations of its role in students' learning. Interviews were conducted individually with each participating teacher at the end of the 10-week implementation period.

The protocol includes topics such as integration of SPDD into existing instructional routines, technical difficulties, students' ability and interest in using the program independently, student engagement, teachers' perceptions of the program including book content, student recordings, and data to monitor students' progress. The protocol concludes with a section collecting background information about the teacher and their classroom.

## Classroom Observation

During the project implementation, a WestEd researcher visited participating classrooms to informally observe teachers and students using SPDD and provide any support as needed.

## SPDD Data

We collected data from SPDD on student progress and activity completion, including the number of times students logged into the program and number of books completed as recorded in the SPDD. SPDD also includes brief program-based assessments after each set of books to evaluate students' early reading skills as they are covered in each set of books, covering phonemes, graphemes, nonsense words, decodable words, and tricky (i.e., non-decodable) words. Additionally, students received Activity Sheets, complementary paper-based activities for each book, to practice key skills offline. We collected and tallied the total number of completed Activity Sheets for participating students.

## DIBELS

The school used the DIBELS benchmark reading assessment (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2020), a set of standardized, short-form tests used to assess early literacy skills in students from kindergarten through sixth grade. DIBELS assessments provide an overall score ranging from 200 to over 480, comprised of subtests for each grade level. Each subtest requires students to complete a task for one minute and the results are expressed as a “fluency” or rate of correct responding per minute. The DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) asks students to read three passages aloud for one minute with ORF representing the number of words read correctly during that time. In early grades, DIBELS also assesses pre-reading skills. For first grade, subtest scores were collected for Letter Name Fluency (LNF), Phonemic Segmenting Fluency (PSF), Nonsense Word Fluency-Correct Letter Sounds (NWF-CLS), and Nonsense Word Fluency-Words Read Correctly (NWF-WRC). Second- and third-grade students are not asked to complete the LNF and PSF subtests.

Benchmark assessments are typically administered three times a year (beginning, middle, and end of the school year) to monitor progress and identify students who may need additional instructional support. DIBELS is a well-established progress monitoring tool and is considered by researchers to be a useful measure for informing reading instruction (Christ et al., 2012, 2013). The school provided WestEd with DIBELS scores from Beginning of Year (BOY; prior to the study) and Middle of Year (MOY; just after the study).

## Findings

### Implementation of SPDD

The teachers all had students for a longer block each day which allowed them to have students use the program on a daily basis. However, due to time constraints and the number of other digital programs used throughout their day, student use of SPDD was intermittent some weeks, especially in the third-grade classroom. Generally, teachers reported using the program about 15–20 minutes a day, four days a week.

There was variability on supports learners required the first few weeks of implementation, especially with younger grade students that are not as independent. First- and second-grade students needed greater support in learning how to generally use SPDD and the recording feature; they would either start the recording too late and/or end too early, not capturing the entire phoneme or word. The first-grade students generally needed the most support from teachers since they needed directions read aloud to them.

- **Initial Teacher Guidance:** Students required hands-on support to navigate SPDD initially, particularly the recording feature.
- **Independence Over Time:** As students became familiar with the program, they demonstrated increased independence in using it.
- **Integration of Skills:** The program effectively combines phonics instruction with reading comprehension activities.

### Alignment to Standards & Science of Reading

Teachers reported SPDD aligned well with their structured approach to teaching phonemic awareness and foundational skills. The veteran teacher noted that the program was a great addition to what the school had been using as it aligned well with the school's current educational practices of

grounding instruction in effective practices in teaching foundational literacy skills.

## Teachers' Impressions of SPDD and Teacher Dashboard

All teachers expressed positive opinions about the program and that it was useful for supporting students' independent practice to reinforce and develop phonics skills. Teachers appreciated the quality, quantity, and variety of

“ [Using Sunshine Phonics Digital Decodables] was great! It is hard to find programs that work with students that are [at a] lower [phonics] level.

- 2nd Grade Teacher ”

content in the decodable books, especially that there were fiction and nonfiction texts.

Teachers liked that they could listen to students' work and that it aided in self-correction. The third-grade teacher in particular noted that she

observed growth in students' confidence and ability to apply the learned skills during reading groups sharing, “I noticed kids correct their mistakes. [They] see a word...then they listen to it, say it, and [if they realize they made a mistake,] they fix it.”

- **Content:** Teachers liked SPDD since unlike other programs, it was appropriate for a wide range of learners. They particularly liked the quantity of books which gave students ample opportunities for practice.
- **Pacing:** Teachers thought the pacing and consistency of the program was appropriate and helpful for emergent readers.
- **Data Collection:** Teachers liked that SPDD collects data on student performance through recordings, helping them identify areas for improvement.

“ [As a teacher], I like [that] we can go back to listen...and check if they're able to say the sounds and words.

- 1st Grade Teacher ”

All teachers noted that they really enjoyed using the program with their students and that they would like to continue using the program through the end of the school year and beyond. They have also expressed interest in using the print-based components to complement the digital program.

## Student Engagement

Students were engaged and motivated by the program. All teachers shared that their students found the program engaging and easy to navigate after the initial learning curve. The consistency of the program format and daily tasks—learn and record new phonemes, graphemes, and words; read and record the new book; and complete paper-based activity sheets—helped students' confidence in building their phonemic awareness and phonics skills. The second- and third-grade students in particular enjoyed hearing their recorded voices. Some students were excited about using the program and asked if they could use it at home.

“ [T]he kids are really engaged in it...and it's pretty self-motivating. They like hearing their voice playback.

- 2nd Grade Teacher ”

- **Motivation:** Many students were motivated to complete books and progress through the program, often tracking how many books they had left.
- **Consistency and Confidence:** The consistency in the sequence of the program activities allowed students to feel successful when learning new phonemes and graphemes.

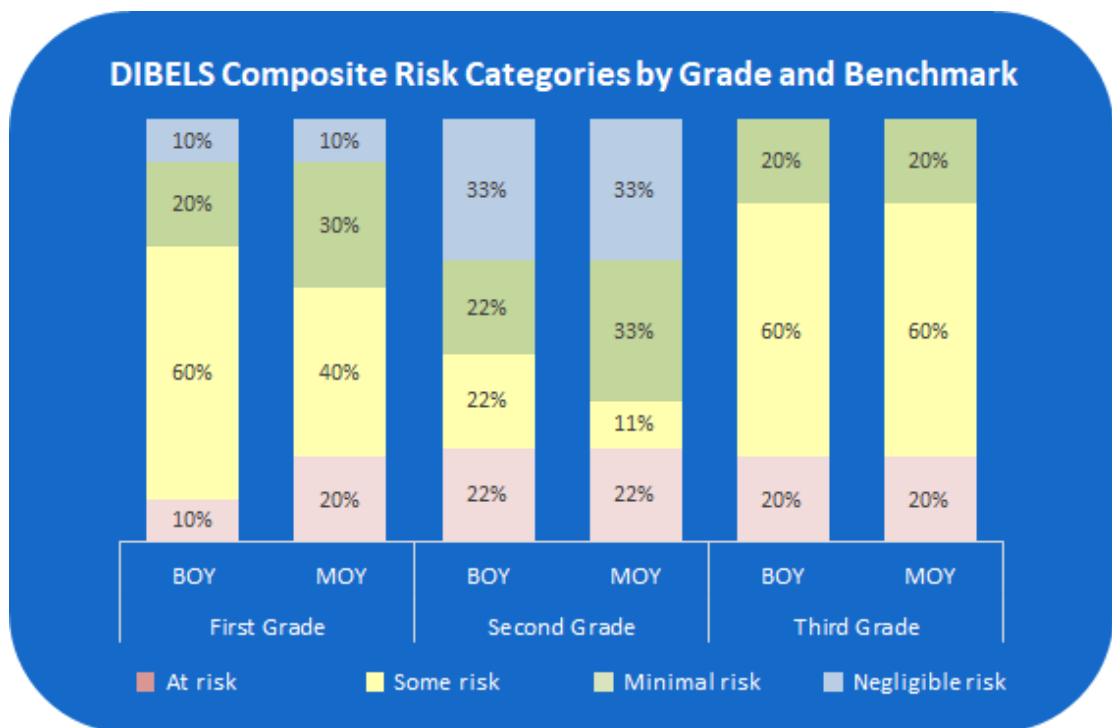
“ I've seen kids grow in their confidence to read out loud or confidence in reading groups with me. [They are] able to tackle new words and break them down.

- 3rd Grade Teacher ”

## SPDD and Students' Literacy Skills

Based on DIBELS data, students started the year with varied reading and pre-reading skills. A majority of first- and third-grade students (70% and 80%, respectively) began the year with moderate (Some Risk) to significant (At Risk) risk of falling behind in reading based on their overall DIBELS scores. Fewer second-grade students (44%) began the year at risk. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in each of the four DIBELS risk categories at the beginning and middle of year benchmark periods. The following sections document the progress students made over the course of the study.

**Figure 1. DIBELS Composite Risk Categories**



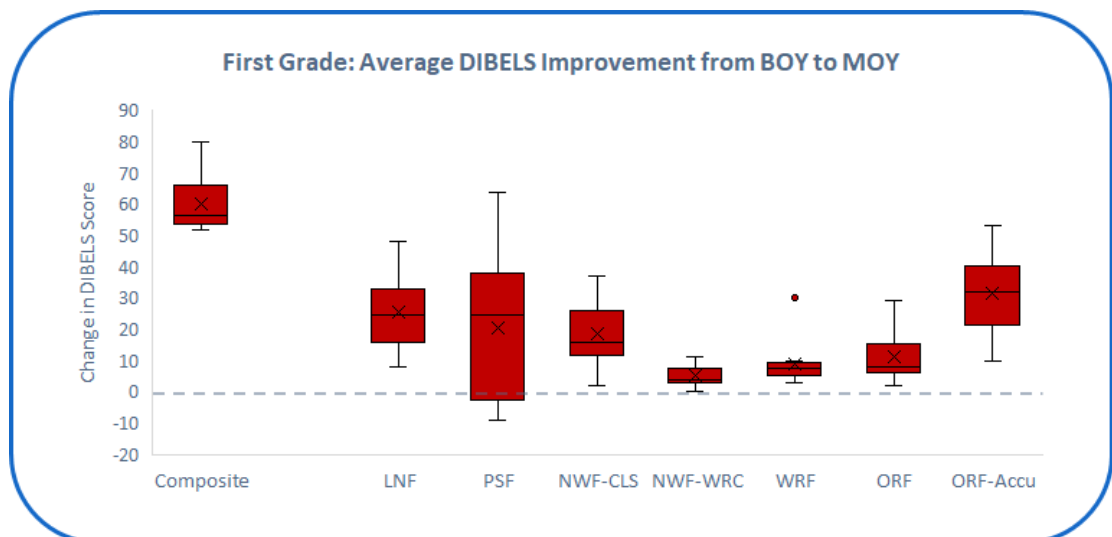
*Note.* BOY = Beginning of Year; MOY = Middle of Year; Risk Categories based upon DIBELS guidelines (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2020).



## First Grade

First-grade students showed improvement on DIBELS tests from the beginning of year (BOY) to the middle of year (MOY) benchmarks. On the composite score, first-grade students improved from an average of 330 at BOY to 390 at MOY, an 18% increase. For Letter Name Fluency, students averaged 37 letter names per minute at BOY and 63 letter names per minute by MOY for a 68% increase. For Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, students averaged 38 per minute at BOY and 59 at MOY, a 54% increase. For Nonsense Word Fluency-Correct Letter Sounds (NWF-CLS), first graders averaged 38 at BOY and 57 at MOY, a 49% increase. For Nonsense Word Fluency-Words Read Correct, first graders averaged 11 at BOY and 16 at MOY, a 45% increase. For Oral Reading Fluency, first graders averaged 5.3 at BOY and 17 at MOY, a 213% increase. First grade Word Reading Accuracy improved from an average of 30% to 62%, a 106% increase. Figure 2 presents box-and-whisker plots<sup>3</sup> of student improvement from the BOY to the MOY on DIBELS scores.

**Figure 2. Average First Grade Improvement on DIBELS**

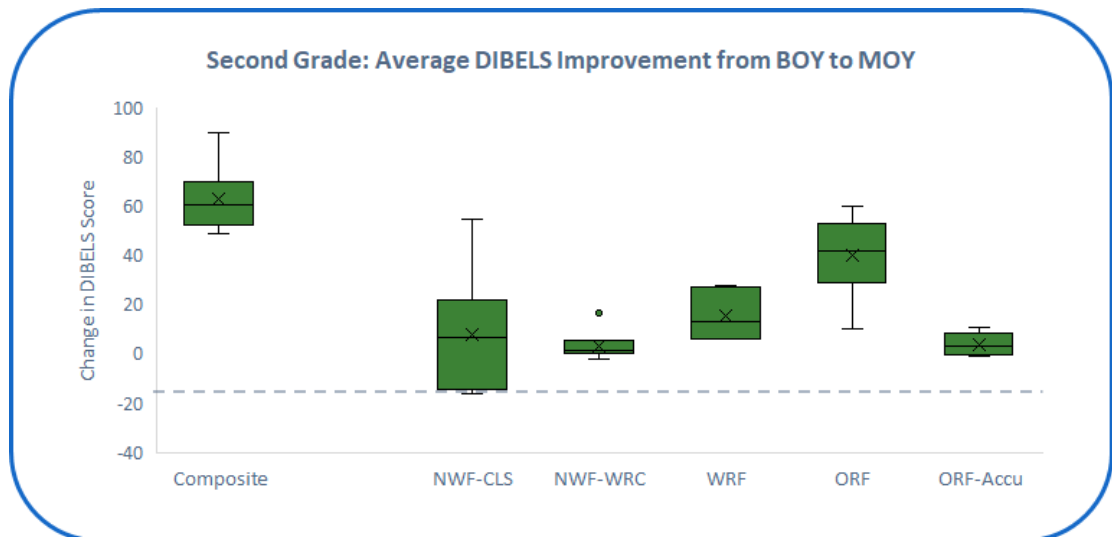


<sup>3</sup> Improvement calculated as Middle of Year score minus Beginning of Year score. The “boxes” represent the range between the 25th and 75th percentiles, the center line the median, and the “x” denotes the average. The lines (or whiskers) indicate variability outside the upper and lower quartiles, and any point outside those lines is considered an outlier.

## Second Grade

Second-grade students also improved on DIBELS subtests from the BOY to MOY benchmarks. Their composite scores improved from an average of 342 at BOY to 404 at MOY, an 18% increase. For Nonsense Word Fluency-Correct Letter Sounds, students averaged 64 at BOY and 68 at MOY, an 8% increase. For Nonsense Word Fluency-Words Read Correct, students averaged 17 at BOY and 20 at MOY, a 15% increase. For Oral Reading Fluency, students averaged 60 at BOY and 100 at MOY, a 66% increase. Second grade Word Reading Accuracy improved from an average of 91% correct to 95% correct, a 4% increase. Figure 3 presents box-and-whisker plots of student improvement from the beginning of the year to the middle of the year on DIBELS scores.

**Figure 3. Average Second Grade Improvement on DIBELS**

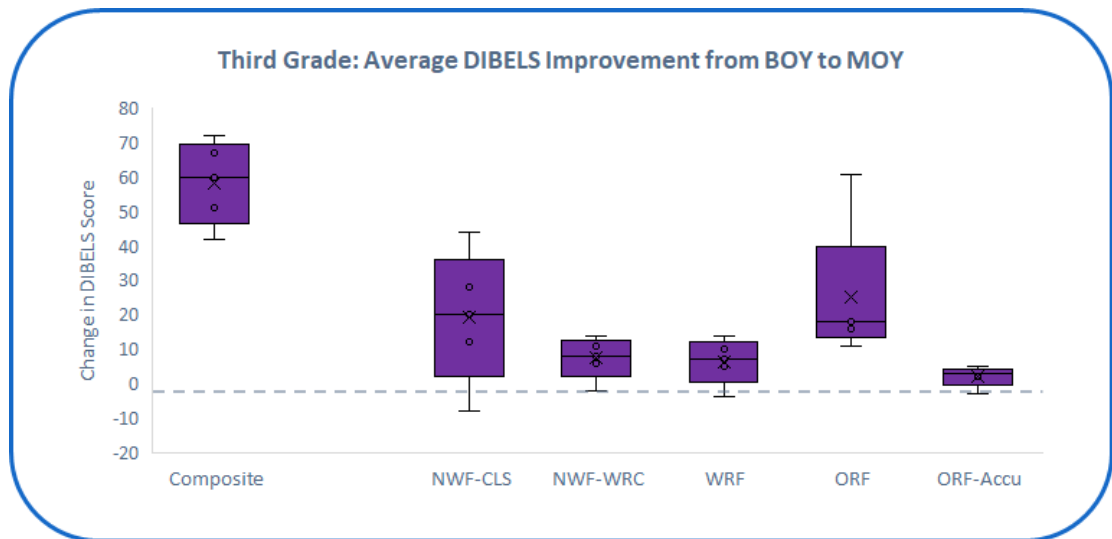


*Note.* LNF and PSF were only collected for first-grade students.

## Third Grade

Similarly, third-grade students showed improvement on DIBELS subtests from the BOY to MOY benchmarks. On average, Composite scores for third-grade students increased by 18%. Students improved by 28% on Nonsense Word Fluency-Correct Letter Sounds and by 39% on Nonsense Word Fluency-Words Read Correct. Third graders' Oral Reading Fluency scores improved from 57 words correct per minute to 82 words correct per minute, a 44% increase and improved their accuracy by 2 percentage points.

**Figure 4. Average Third Grade Improvement on DIBELS**



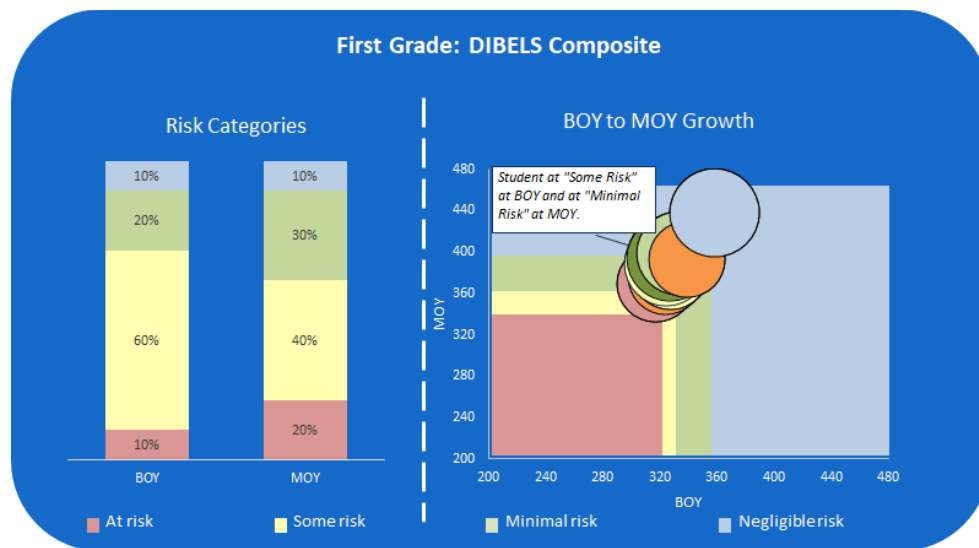
*Note.* LNF and PSF were only collected for first-grade students.

## Changes in Risk Categories

All students demonstrated improvement on their DIBELS Composite scores, interestingly, averaging 18% improvement at each of the first, second, and third grade levels. Figures 5–7 display two visualizations of changes in risk categories for each grade level. The bar chart on the left side of each figure summarizes the percentage of students in each category at BOY (left bar) and at MOY (right bar) benchmarks. On the right, the chart plots each student's BOY score on the x-axis and their MOY score on the y-axis, such that each bubble represents a single student. The size of each bubble

indicates the percentage of growth from BOY to MOY. The red region represents scores in the “At Risk” category; the yellow region is for scores in the “Some Risk” category; the green and blue regions represent “Minimal” and “Negligible” risk, respectively. Students who changed categories are noted with darker shaded bubbles and text. For example, one first-grade student began the year with a 327 Composite score, which corresponds to the “Some Risk” category. By MOY, this student improved by 20% and scored 394 on the composite, corresponding to the “Minimal Risk” category. Most students’ growth did not result in a change in DIBELS risk categories, meaning their risk category remained the same from BOY to MOY. However, some students’ DIBELS risk category changed: three students improved enough to lower their risk category, while another three students had less improvement, which moved them into a higher risk category on the composite.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 5. First Grade DIBELS Composite Risk Categories



<sup>4</sup> One student in first grade and two students in second grade improved enough to lower their risk category. Two students in first grade and one student in second grade improved only a little, which raised their risk category.

Figure 6. Second Grade DIBELS Composite Risk Categories

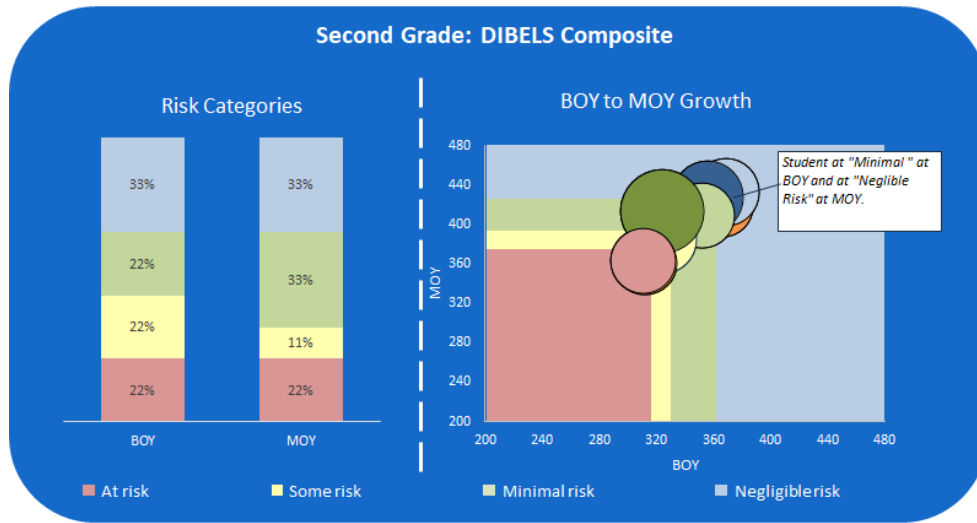
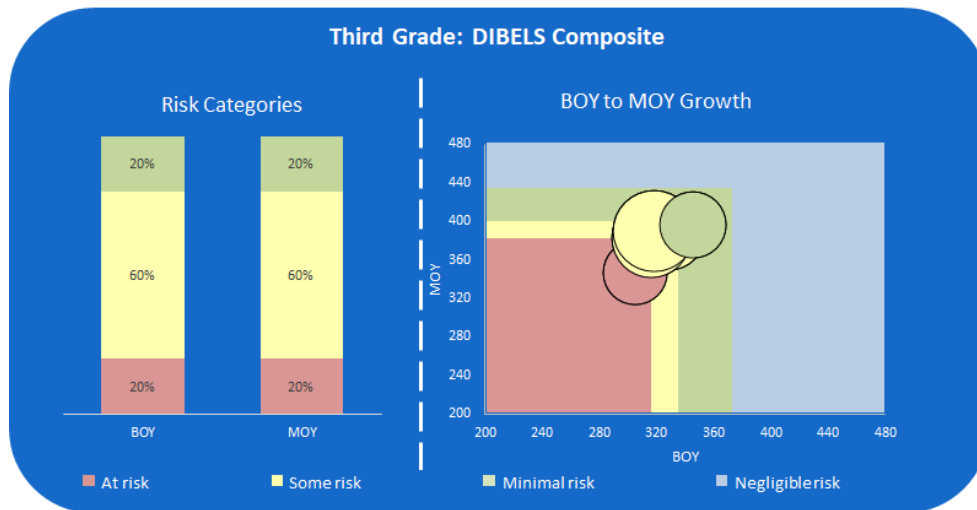


Figure 7. Third Grade DIBELS Composite Risk Categories



## How Students Progressed through SPDD

Students used SPDD for about 10 weeks during the fall, averaging 3.5 days per week, with a median usage of 4 days. They used the program for an average of 40 minutes per week or 11 minutes per day. SPDD was primarily used in small group rotations, and students most frequently worked on exercises within the Phonics, Sight Words, Word Families, and Language Study domains. After the study, most teachers suggested that 11–20 minutes per book a day was the ideal usage time.

Across all grades, students logged in approximately 30 times on average, completed about 19 digital books, and finished 18 Activity Sheets. First- and second-grade students tended to complete between 15 and 29 books, with all students completing at least seven books, and five students completing 25 or more books. Student logins ranged from 12 to 50 times. Similarly, all students completed at least seven Activity Sheets, ranging between 7 to 28. First- and second-grade students typically completed more Activity Sheets than third-grade students. On average, first-grade students logged in almost twice as often (40 times) as second graders (25 times) and third graders (14 times). See Table 2 for a summary of SPDD activities by grade.

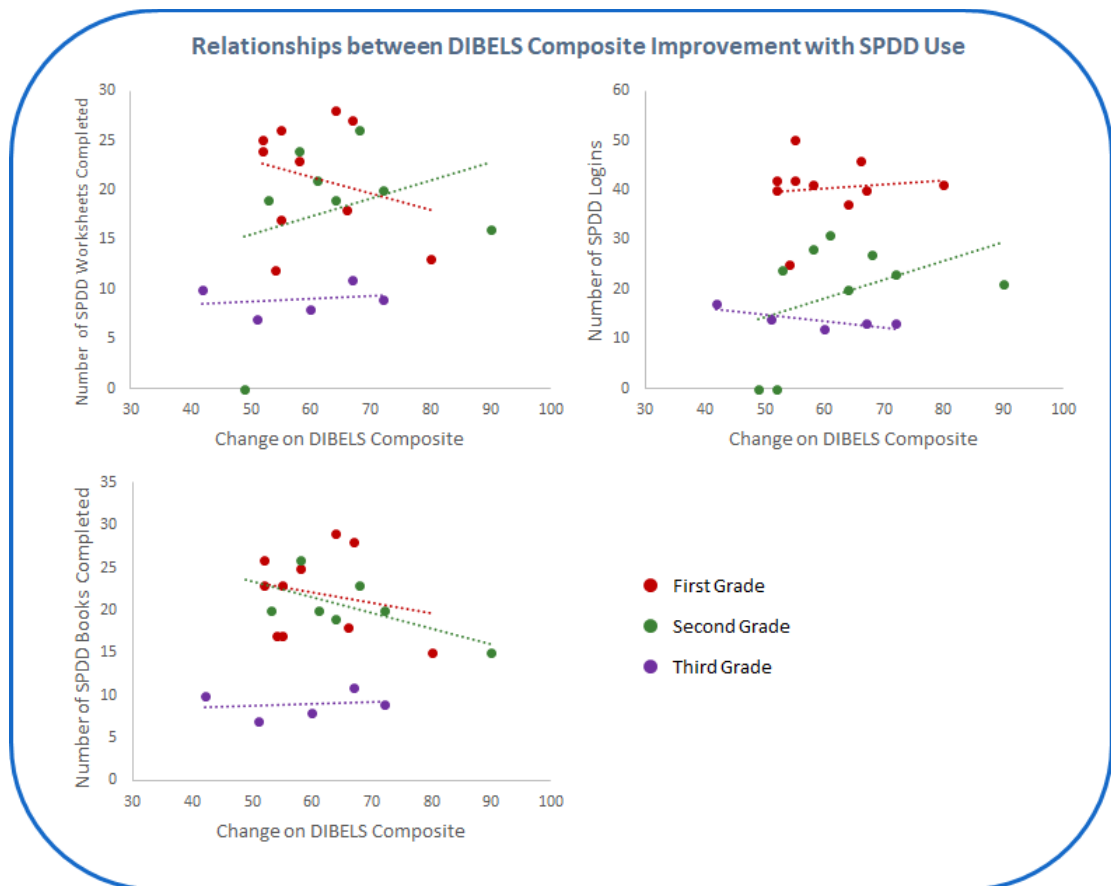
**Table 2. Summary of Student SPDD Use**

Average #	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
Logins	40	25	14
Books Completed	22	20	9
Activity Sheets Completed	21	21	9

## How Student Growth was Related to SPDD

We also examined the relationship between student improvement on foundational skills (DIBELS) and SPDD usage (logins, books completed, Activity Sheets completed). Generally, first- and second-grade students who logged in more frequently tended to show greater improvement on DIBELS subtests. In contrast, third graders who improved more on DIBELS tended to complete more books and Activity Sheets. That is, for third graders, the number of times a student logged in was less related to DIBELS growth than the number of books and Activity Sheets completed.

**Figure 8. Relationships of SPDD Use with DIBELS Growth**



Note. Trendlines are linear trends of available data.

## Conclusion

Teachers expressed positive opinions about the Sunshine Phonics Digital Decodables program, noting its effectiveness in fostering students' independent practice to develop phonics skills. The program engaged and motivated students, receiving praise for the variety and quality of content in the decodable books. The recording feature was particularly valued, as it facilitated students' self-correction and enabled teachers to monitor and assess student progress. Teachers observed growth in students' confidence and skill application, with increased independence in using the program over time. The program's alignment with educational standards and foundational literacy practices was highlighted as a strength.

Despite time constraints and intermittent use, students showed improved phonemic awareness and phonics skills, as evidenced by DIBELS data indicating significant progress, particularly among first and third graders. First graders showed notable improvements across multiple metrics, from letter name fluency to oral reading fluency. Second graders also improved, though to a lesser extent in some areas, while third graders experienced progress in reading fluency and comprehension. Engagement and effective integration of phonics instruction with reading comprehension activities contributed to these achievements. Usage data indicated that regular logins and completion of digital books correlated with student growth, particularly in the lower grades, while third grade improvements were more closely tied to books completed.



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