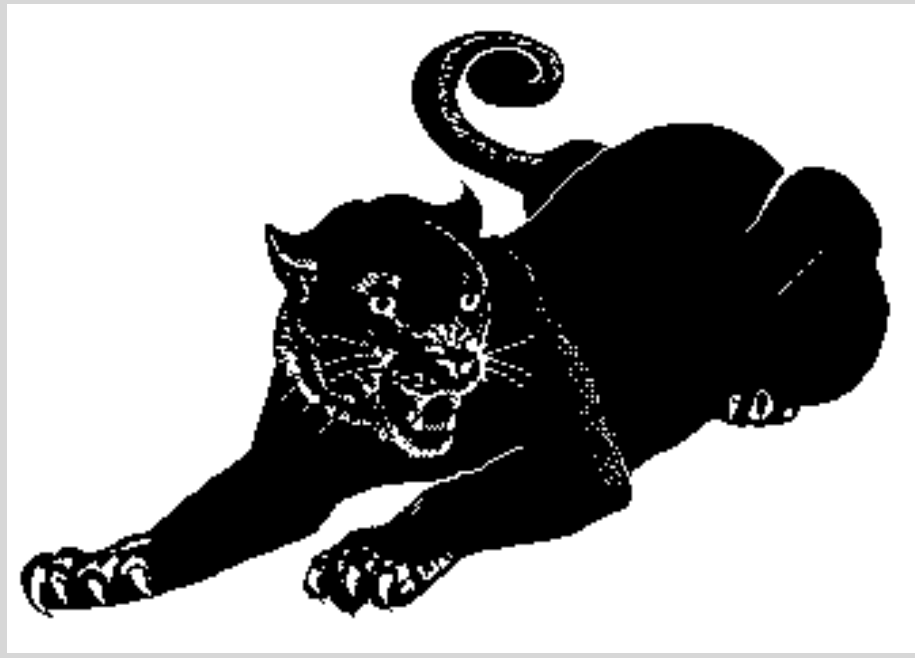# What Makes a Successful Reader?

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School Priorities

Rural School is a small K-8 school located about 15 miles outside of a moderately-sized Oregon city. With only 4 classrooms, Rural School has 2-3 grade levels in each room. The school area was once booming with logging, but now is home to a wide range of families. Almost 70% of the families qualify for free/reduced lunch, but there are several very affluent families who live in the area because they want to have a large house on the river.

Several years ago staff began engaging in conversations about goals for student learning. While some felt that all kids could learn and goals should be set at 100% meeting benchmarks, others felt that there were too many outside factors - home life, student defiance, etc. - to have that kind of expectation. Over several months and some deep sharing, all staff came to appreciate the goal of 100% of students meeting benchmarks. While we have only reached that goal in some areas and at some grade levels, we are continually celebrating our accomplishments and at the same time pushing ourselves to reach all kids.

District Priorities

Several years ago, district leadership created a vision document that outlined priorities for each grade level. It described the Kindergarten through second grades as the "Learning to Read" stage and grades 3 and up as "Reading to Learn." This aligned with our school beliefs, and eventually helped us decide which measures were best to use for our tracking and accountability purposes.
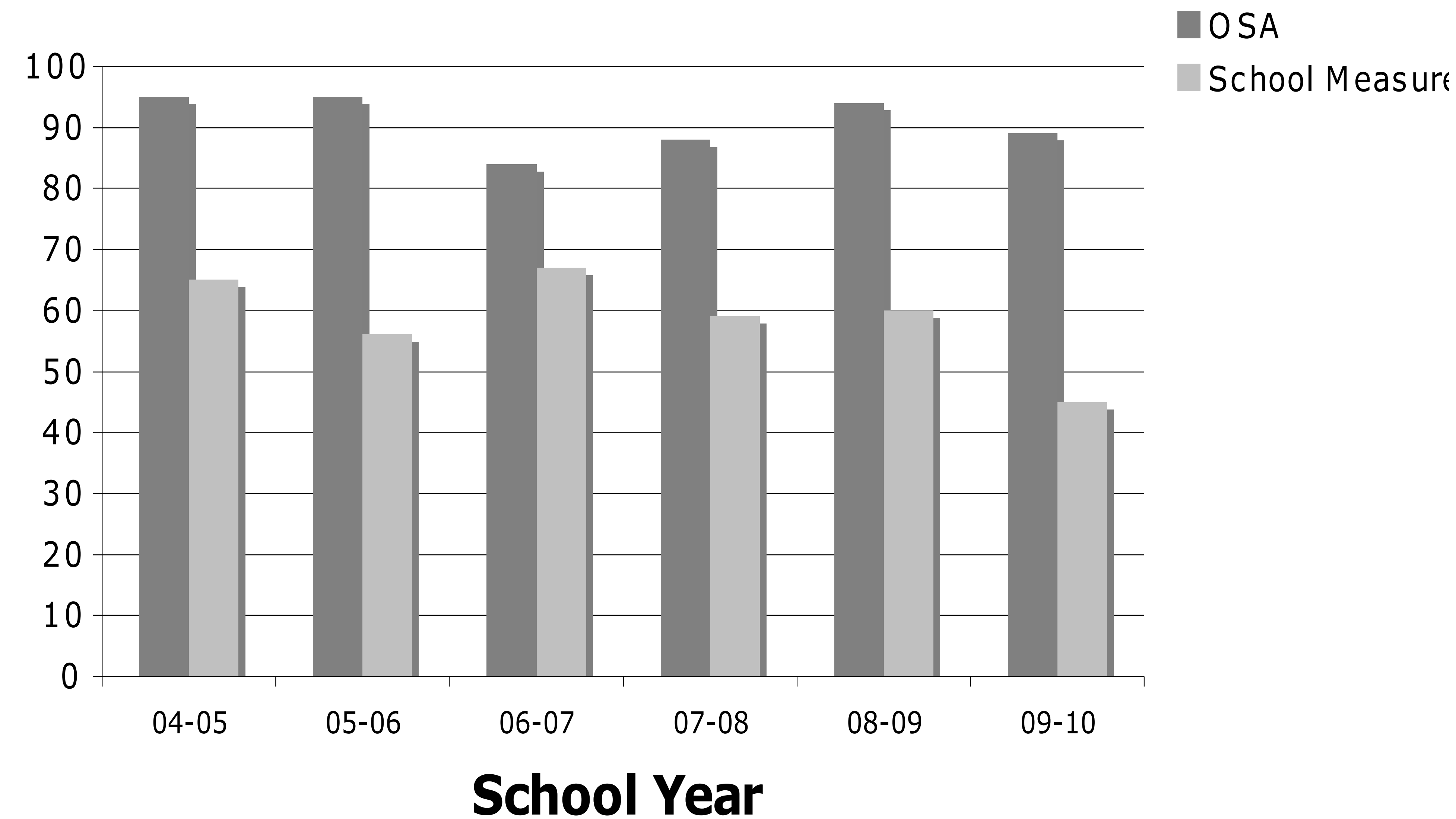
What the Research and Theory Say

In *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*, DuFour, DuFour and Eaker describe the big ideas behind a PLC. In that description, they state, "Schools will not know whether or not all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that all students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential to their success." It is clear that being a good reader is an essential skill to success.

The highly-popular and research-backed 2004 publication *Reading Next* emphasizes using an optimal mix of 15 key elements in order to create an effective school-wide reading system. Although there is some choice involved, the research is clear that without ongoing summative assessment, a program cannot succeed.

In order to be effective instructors and hold ourselves accountable, we felt that we needed a consistent summative assessment that we all felt was a valid measure of success. Due to district decisions, our school has used three different measures over the last four years (DIBELS, AIMSWeb and Easy CBM). The last two years we have been using Easy CBM and our district plans to continue this, but their "overall score" for students changed between years one and two. In the first year, the system used a formula based on all the measures to give an overall percentile rank for each child. While not the criterion-referenced model that our staff appreciated in the DIBELS system, this was an understandable number and allowed us to set a benchmark for our students to reach: at or above the 50th percentile. Unfortunately, this year that part of the system was removed, leaving us with no way to give kids an overall reading score.

Reading Success at Rural School

Bar chart titled "Reading Success at Rural School" comparing OSA and School Measure by School Year. X-axis: School Year; Y-axis: 0 to 100.

School Year	OSA	School Measure
04-05	95	65
05-06	95	56
06-07	84	67
07-08	88	59
08-09	94	60
09-10	89	45

Options for Assessment

Since we are part of a school district, our school based measure has always been the one approved and purchased by the district. For last year and this year, that measure has been Easy CBM. This tool provides several different reading measures at each grade level. For instance, during their first grade year, students take the assessments for phoneme segmentation, letter name fluency, letter sound fluency, word reading fluency, and passage reading fluency. While this gives us a lot of data to analyze and help inform instruction, it creates a problem when we want a summative measure that shows overall progress in reading. In the past, we've used reading fluency (also called oral reading fluency) for all grades. The Easy CBM, while it has its limitations, does also offer a reading comprehension measure starting in the 2nd grade and we wondered if we should use that. We considered all of the following options before making our decision:
1. Use only Easy CBM reading fluency as our measure of reading at all grades
2. Use Easy CBM reading fluency as our measure of reading at grades K-2 and use the Oregon State Assessment (OSA) as our measure in grades 3-8
3. Use the Easy CBM reading fluency measure at grades K-1 and Easy CBM reading comprehension measure at grades 2-8
4. Create some kind of formula where we could average all of the reading measure into one conglomerate score
5. Use several measures: Easy CBM reading fluency for grades K-8, Easy CBM comprehension for grades 2-8, and OSA scores for grades 3-8

Our Choice

After much thought and discussion, our staff decided to go with choice 5 - use multiple measures. Our focus as a school has long been preparing kids to be successful in high school, college and careers. While we recognize the correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension, we also feel that if we have valid reading comprehension measures available to us then why not use them.

Our conversation then turned to which comprehension measure to use. Easy CBM was readily available to us as an online tool with multiple measures at each grade level. The students could take the tests in about 45 minutes and we could print out graphs of progress over time and show them to kids. The OSA, on the other hand, provides a much more reliable measure and the format for testing is easier for kids (shorter passages with fewer questions and more graphics per passage).

After thinking about best practices and hearing pros and cons of each measure, we thought that the more data the better. Being such a small school, we realized that we had the opportunity to look at individual kid data when making program choices. By having more data we thought we could get a more complete picture of each child's reading success.

It is important to note that we wanted to use option 4, but realized that nobody on our staff had enough background in statistics and reading research to be able to come up with a sufficient formula to combine all the measures into one. Basically - we knew enough to know that we didn't know enough on this topic.

Implementation Plan

In order to use so many measures, we had to make sure that we were giving each one at the appropriate time and using them effectively. While more data provides a more clear picture of kids' reading success, it also provides opportunity to get lost in the numbers.

Timeline:

Since we already had access to all of the measures, we just had to make sure we were using them. Taking the OSA is a requirement each year for each kid in our 3rd through 8th grades, so we knew we would be doing that anyway. The Easy CBM comprehension measures, though, were not required ones. We had already been using them consistently throughout the year in 4th through 8th grades, so we had to start using them in 2nd and 3rd. Since we didn't start the year off using them at these lower grades, we wondered if we should just wait until next year to begin them. In the end, we decided to start them now so that the kids and the staff would get used to the process. Next year, the plan is to start the year off with them at 2nd through 8th grades.

Resource Impacts:

The reason we came to this problem in the first place was because we were seeing significant positive results from our OSA scores but not so positive results from our school measure (see graph). We wondered what the disconnect was and analyzed it using a variety of tools. Each year after our winter benchmark results (using the school measure), we created a color-coded chart showing which students were at benchmark and which were at low or high risk. This year, the Easy CBM system did not provide us with a "conglomerate" score that we could use on this chart. So when we went to graph the scores, we didn't know which score to use.

After making the decision to use multiple measures, we had to decide which one to use on the charts or choose to stop using the charts. I am proud to say that my staff wanted badly the data as it was presented in the charts and dedicated themselves to finding a way make it work. In the end, we used the Easy CBM comprehension fluency data for Kindergarten and 1st grades and the Easy CBM comprehension data for 2nd through 8th grades. In addition, we put a star sticker on each kid that had already passed the OSA reading test. This way, we could easily see the best data for all kids and make basic conclusions about reading success at our school.

Outcome Projections:

I predict that this model will serve us well. In the end, we want to prepare all our students to be successful readers - and understanding and applying what you read is a great way to measure that. Combining this approach with our constant strive to get 100% of our students at benchmark, I can safely say that we will aggressively work to improve reading success for years to come.

Sources:
DuFour, DuFour and Eaker. *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New Insights for Improving Schools,* Solution Tree Publishing, 2008, p. 18.
Biancarosa, Gina and Snow, Catherine. *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy,* Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004, p. 29
Rural School Improvement Plan 2009-2011
District X Vision for Learning