

The implications are clear: We need to assess reading levels in order to make sure kids are working in a zone where they can learn. Thus, the first step in developing a strong reading program, and the first step we take in *Reading Without Limits*, is to find our students' levels. This step applies to all teachers, whether you are teaching struggling readers in high school or students ranging from emergent to fluent in elementary school. It is also extremely relevant if you aren't a reading teacher. What if you are giving students material, from word problems to work in textbooks, in their frustration zone? This chapter will show you how to find an answer to that question.

I will show practical ways to assess reading levels, both for teachers with more time and teachers with very little time, in all grades. If your school already has an assessment in place that determines reading levels, this chapter shows kid-friendly ways to supplement your program. Mix and match the suggestions to best suit the needs of your students, classroom, and school. Once you determine what your students can read comfortably, then choice reading, guided reading, and shared reading will all fall into place.

## **DETERMINE A STUDENT'S READING LEVEL BY USING A RUNNING RECORD**

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There are many different ways to assess student reading levels, ranging from commercially developed inventories to teacher-developed approaches unique to each classroom. No matter which method you choose, we have found at minimum it should be able to do the following:

- Determine a student's comfort reading level
- Be scaled so that it measures progress
- Assess students' reading fluency, ability to decode, reading comprehension, and ability to retell

In order to do all of the above, we administer one-on-one reading assessments. My favorite is running records, developed by New Zealand reading researcher Marie Clay.<sup>13</sup> Running records ask students to read a passage out loud so we can assess fluency and decoding. Halfway through the reading, students read on in their heads. After the reading, students answer comprehension questions and retell.

There are many commercial running record inventories available, many for free, that produce running records as a system. These reading assessment systems provide a range of texts on different levels of difficulty. Using the texts and the questions provided, you match students to the texts that they can read comfortably. Running records require meeting with a student one-on-one. I know one-on-one assessments may not be realistic for every teacher. Some high school teachers teach upward of 200 students a day. Therefore, in the section that follows I suggest alternatives for teachers who aren't able to do one-on-one inventories. But I recommend one-on-one assessments above all others.

Here is an example of a running record. It is divided into three parts.

1. Students read 100 words aloud so you can assess fluency and decoding
2. Students read on in their heads
3. Students answer comprehension questions and retell the passage

As a student is reading aloud, the teacher takes notes. Determine if a student makes an error as she reads aloud (a miscue) or self-corrects herself (not a miscue). Basically, you are looking for your student's percentage accuracy with a passage. If the passage is just right, the student will read with 96% or better accuracy. I will explain why 96% is an important number in the next section. That's why running records stop oral reading at 100 words. It's simple math!