

# Identifying a Striving Reader's Most Urgent Literacy Need

A Quick Guide for Educators and Leaders of Students in Grades 4+

## Is This a Comprehension Problem or Something Else?

For students in grades 4 and above, state assessments and popular benchmarks report comprehension scores and reading proficiency levels, but they don't tell you why a student is struggling to comprehend.

Decoding is not directly assessed in most benchmark or screening tools after third grade. Yet a striving reader who has not yet crossed the decoding threshold typically struggles with comprehension—and comprehension-focused intervention alone is unlikely to be effective, regardless of how well it is designed.

Before selecting an intervention, educators need to identify the root cause of a student's reading difficulties.

**🚩 A practical first red flag:** Students in grades 4+ whose reading proficiency or comprehension scores fall **at or below the 25th percentile** should be considered for a closer look. Many of these students have unidentified decoding deficits that were not addressed in the early grades.

## Two Roots of Reading Difficulty

The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) establishes that reading comprehension is the product of two components:



If either component is very weak, reading comprehension suffers, regardless of how strong the other is. A striving reader may have difficulty in word recognition, language comprehension, or both.

## The Decoding Threshold: What the Research Tells Us

The decoding threshold is the point at which a reader's word recognition becomes accurate and automatic enough that the student no longer has to think about figuring out each word—and can instead focus on making meaning from the text.

If a student has not yet crossed the decoding threshold, comprehension-focused intervention alone is unlikely to produce meaningful reading gains (Wang et al., 2019). Decoding-focused intervention should be a priority.

# What a Decoding Deficit Looks Like in the Classroom

A student who has not yet crossed the decoding threshold often:



Reads slowly and laboriously, frequently skipping, guessing at, or misreading words



Avoids reading, tires easily, or becomes frustrated during independent reading



Understands more when text is read aloud than when reading independently



Demonstrates strong oral language—listens well and speaks clearly—but their reading doesn't reflect their knowledge or reasoning ability



Has developed workarounds (using context, first letters, word shape) that can mask the gap on some measures

**An important note:** Research tells us that the vast majority of students require explicit, systematic phonics and decoding instruction to learn how to read, yet many students in grades 4 and above did not receive this instruction in the early grades. Their decoding gaps reflect insufficient instruction, not a lack of ability, motivation, or effort.



# Matching Students to the Right Intervention

Ask two questions about each student:

1. Is the student's decoding strong or weak? Use a quick phonics or fluency assessment (see below).
2. Is the student's language comprehension strong or weak? Use listening comprehension, vocabulary data, or teacher observation. A useful question: Does the student follow along and contribute meaningfully when the text is read aloud?

Then, match the profile to the intervention:



## Intervention Matching Matrix





## How to Assess Decoding in Grades 4+

Most schools do not directly assess phonics or decoding above grade 3. The tools below are free and take 5-15 minutes each.

Tool	What it Tells You	Grade Range	Where to Find it
<b>EPS Learning Decoding Threshold Quick Check</b>	Quick screener to flag students who are likely below the decoding threshold	Grades 3+	<a href="https://epslearning.com">epslearning.com</a> Search "Decoding Threshold Quick Check"
<b>DIBELS, 8th Edition - (ORF)</b>	Oral Reading Fluency (words correct per minute); a score below the 25th percentile warrants NWF and WRF (below)	K-8; especially useful for grades 4+ with suspected gaps	<a href="#">DIBELS: University of Oregon</a> Use Hasbrouck & Tindal (2017) norms to interpret
<b>DIBELS, 8th Edition - NWF and WRF</b>	<p><b>Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF):</b> Basic phonics/alphabetic principle</p> <p><b>Word Reading Fluency (WRF):</b> Accuracy and automaticity in reading real, single words</p> <p><i>Both subtests are useful as diagnostic tools for students reading well below grade.</i></p>	Normed for K-3; can be used diagnostically with older students performing well below grade	<a href="#">DIBELS: University of Oregon</a>

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