

# PALS Plus FAQs



## General Administration

### **How long does it take to administer PALS Plus (1-8)?**

The time it takes to administer PALS Plus to a student can vary based on the reading level of the student, the number of passages administered, and the need to administer additional tasks in order to diagnose the student's current stage of literacy development, and the teacher's familiarity and experience with the assessment process. Also, the Spelling task is usually administered to a whole class or in small groups; administering Spelling individually will significantly increase the total assessment time for a class. Considered on an individual student basis, PALS Plus administration will probably vary from 25-40 minutes.

### **How were the benchmarks established for PALS Plus tasks?**

Benchmarks for PALS Plus tasks are based on seventeen years of research with struggling readers; statewide PALS data from successive cohorts of Virginia's Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI); data gathered from pilot and field tests conducted with approximately 8,000 first-, second-, and third-grade students; and data gathered from pilot and field tests conducted with approximately 9,000 students in grades four through eight.

### **What is the criteria for the high benchmark designation?**

The high benchmark designation provides the option to exempt students who are reading well above grade level from future PALS screenings. The high benchmark designation is indicated with an upward arrow next to a student's name in the PALS Class List in teacher-level PALS Online accounts. Students are eligible for the high benchmark designation in the spring of first grade or the fall of second grade. Please refer to the Administration and Scoring Guide for details about how a student can achieve a high benchmark designation.

## Entry Level Tasks: Word Recognition & Spelling

### **What do I do if the Entry Level list is too difficult for the student?**

The Entry Level word list must be administered, since this score is part of the Entry Level Summed Score. If the student misses five to eight words in succession, you may open up the list. Ask the student to identify any words that s/he knows in order to put the student at ease and

to glean any useful information possible. The next step would be to administer a lower level list if applicable.

### **Do I stop administration after I give the Entry Level word list?**

The Entry Level word list is the only one required for the Summed Score, but you will continue administering word lists until you have found the highest word list from which the student can correctly read 15 words. Students' scores on the Word Recognition in Isolation (WRI) lists indicate the appropriate level to begin Level A passage reading for the Oral Reading in Context task.

### **My school uses a developmental word study program or model for spelling and/or word study (such as Words Their Way). Is it necessary to do an initial spelling assessment beyond what is in PALS?**

The information obtained in the spelling inventory in PALS provides information about a student's spelling stage. This information can be used to begin developmental spelling/word study instruction without further assessment. Therefore, the spelling assessment included in PALS is the only spelling assessment needed before beginning developmental word study.

Other developmental spelling assessments can be administered at various points throughout the school year to monitor progress of student's spelling/word study development.

Please note that there also are Spelling Quick Checks available in the PALS Online System for more closely monitoring student progress in their development of spelling skills and progress through the spelling stages.

### **What is the purpose of the Word Recognition in Isolation task?**

The purpose of the Word Recognition in Isolation (WRI) task, regardless of administration method, is to measure a student's automatic recognition of reading vocabulary at each grade level. Word Recognition in Isolation is a measure of immediate word identification, or sight word knowledge. It is not a decoding measure; students should not be given enough time to decode, or "sound out" the words. Keep in mind that WRI results indicate the required oral reading passage to be read by each student. Prompting students to sound out WRI words and spending time decoding will result in an inflated WRI score, and indicate a passage level that is too high for the student.

**Are Word Recognition in Isolation and the E-WRI (Electronic Word Recognition in Isolation) equivalent measures? Will a student's results be impacted by the administration method of Word Recognition in Isolation task s/he completes?**

When the E-WRI version was piloted by PALS, there was no significant difference between E-WRI results and paper-and-pencil results. It is critical, however, that administration procedures for paper-and-pencil Word Recognition in Isolation are followed with fidelity. The teacher must move through each list quickly, presenting each word for less than a second. If the student doesn't say the word immediately, the teacher moves on to the next word. When teachers follow this procedure with fidelity, the administration method of the assessment (paper-and-pencil or E-WRI) does not impact student performance.

**How does a teacher decide which administration method to use for Word Recognition in Isolation (paper-and-pencil or E-WRI)? Can the teacher move between administration methods within an assessment window or year?**

Administration decisions about Word Recognition in Isolation are made at the local (district, school, or classroom) level. Using Electronic Word Recognition in Isolation (E-WRI) feature ensures that students see each word for a controlled amount of time. For the paper-and-pencil version of Word Recognition in Isolation to be implemented with fidelity, each assessor needs to be confident that s/he is showing words in a similar manner (exposing each word for less than one second). Consistently using E-WRI with each student greatly reduces inconsistencies in administration. Technically, the PALS Online System will allow the teacher to use E-WRI for one student, and the paper-and-pencil version for another student. However, only one assessment method can be used per student during each assessment window.

## **Level A Tasks**

**My student had two oral reading scores at the independent level for first and second grade texts, but scores were only instructional on the word lists for those grades. Why isn't his reading level "independent," based on the oral reading scores?**

The definition of the independent level in reading is that level on which a student functions with speed and accuracy guaranteed. If a student is truly independent at a given level, he or she should be equally accurate both in and out of context.

**What is the difference between a student who is independent at the first grade level, and a student who is instructional between first and second grade levels?**

For students who were assigned only an independent level (able to read and comprehend this level with no support), there was not enough information collected to determine an instructional level, which is presumably achieved with a higher level passage. A student who is listed as instructional between two grade levels (i.e., between 1st and 2nd) has scores that fall within the instructional range (90-97%) at both levels, but is not independent (higher than 98%) at either one. This means that the student will achieve the fastest growth when either level is used for instruction, but will need guided support for reading at either level. Remember to take the student's reading rate, fluency, and comprehension scores for each passage into consideration when determining which instructional level will most benefit the student in instruction.

**Why is a student listed as instructional at the 2nd grade level when his 2nd grade Word Recognition in Isolation (WRI) score was 15-17, but his 2nd grade Oral Reading in Context Score (ORC) was below 90%?**

This is a highly unlikely scenario and happened only 1.4% of the time in statewide administration of PALS 1-3 in Fall 2001. Ninety-nine percent of the time, if a student scored an instructional-level score on the 2nd grade WRI (15-17 words correct), the student scored an instructional or independent ORC score at the end of 2nd grade level as well. For students who achieved a WRI instructional level at the 1st grade level, 96% of them scored at an instructional or independent level on the 1st grade ORC. For those who scored an instructional level on the 3rd grade level 99% also scored at an instructional or independent level on the 3rd grade ORC. So, with a WRI score at the instructional level, in most cases, the ORC is either at an instructional (90-97% accuracy) or independent (98-100% accuracy) level as well. In a few instances where these two scores conflict, the WRI score is the default since this task predicts overall reading level better than any other measure.

**Do the Oral Reading in Context passages represent beginning, middle, or end-of-the-year text?**

The primer passage is typical of beginning first grade material (1.1). The first through eighth grade passages represent end-of-the-year text (1.2-8.2).

### **Can I redirect a child if they skip an entire line when reading?**

Yes; if the child skips an entire line of text when reading, stop the child and re-direct him or her to the correct place. Do not count this as an error.

### **Why is reading comprehension only included in the instructional oral reading level diagnosis for fourth grade and above?**

The purpose of reading is to comprehend, and most agree that comprehension is not possible if the words are not decoded or understood. Because word recognition and decoding enable comprehension, these two components of learning to read process are emphasized in the primary grades (Paris & Paris, 2003). Basic word recognition and decoding competence are precursors to any measurable reading achievement and research has repeatedly demonstrated that automated decoding skills enable better comprehension with increasing age and proficiency. Reading comprehension requires the kind of intellectual reasoning that is possible only after decoding skills have become automated, thus freeing cognitive resources for understanding (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). If students can read words accurately and fluently, the necessary condition for reading comprehension has been satisfied. Without instruction, however, accurate and effortless word recognition may not be sufficient for good reading comprehension. Clearly, there are other factors that can influence understanding. Background knowledge, engagement, vocabulary knowledge, application of metacognitive strategies, cognitive capacity, practice, motivation, general language skill, and personality can influence reading comprehension even if the words are easily identified. Thus, it might be said that word recognition and decoding are necessary but not sufficient to ensure reading comprehension. As students advance to higher reading levels, having largely “broken the code” already, comprehension and reading rate become more significant in determining whether a particular reading level is appropriate for use during instruction. For fourth grade passages and higher, the PALS Online System will only diagnose an instructional reading level if accuracy, reading rate, and comprehension are all within an instructional range.

### **When administering Oral Reading in Context, do I need to determine a frustration, instructional, and independent level for each student?**

#### **How do I know when I am finished?**

The primary goal of the Oral Reading in Context (ORC) task is to determine an instructional oral reading level for each

student, so that students may be grouped appropriately for instruction. Finding the instructional level is important because this level offers a “just right” balance of supports and challenges to maximize the student’s growth when used in instruction with the teacher.

The PALS Online System will initially require the teacher to administer the passage that is most likely to be at the student’s instructional level. This passage is determined based on a student’s performance on Word Recognition in Isolation (see p. 20 of 1 – 3 Administration and Scoring Guide for more information). Word Recognition in Isolation is a strong indication of a student’s instructional level; thus the resulting required passage is likely very close to or is at the student’s instructional level.

If the ORC task confirms this as either an instructional or independent level based on accuracy (and also taking into consideration the reading rate and comprehension if it is a fourth grade passage or higher), then the system will consider assessment to be complete.

Teachers have the option to collect and enter scores for additional passages, but this is not required.

If the required passage yields an accuracy score below 90%, or if it is a fourth grade passage or higher and the reading rate is low or comprehension is less than 50%, then a lower passage will be required.

If you are using Traditional Score Entry, the new required passage will be highlighted. If you are using the Online Assessment Wizard, the new required passage will appear in the “Required Tasks” box.

### **Why is it important to administer the comprehension questions as part of Oral Reading in Context? What information is gathered to inform instruction?**

The comprehension questions included in the Oral Reading in Context task measure comprehension on six multiple choice questions for the passages leveled primer through grade eight. (Comprehension questions are not administered at the readiness and preprimer levels.) Questions and answers are read aloud by the assessor to students for the primer and first grade passages. Students working with the second through eighth grade passages read questions and select answers independently. At any level, for most questions, students answer the questions without looking back at the passage. The comprehension questions are an optional portion of Oral Reading in Context for primer through third grade passages; whether to use these comprehension questions as part of the assessment is a decision made at the local (district, school, or classroom) level. For fourth grade passages and higher, the comprehension questions are required. The comprehension questions provide one measure of



the complex process of comprehension. Comprehension is nearly impossible to measure by ANY single measure, because it involves background knowledge, knowledge of vocabulary, familiarity with the genre, ability to read the words accurately and with ease, motivation to read with understanding, attention, intellectual engagement and activation of background knowledge, working memory, and other factors. Examining whether a student answered the questions correctly provides a quick screening measure of comprehension. The teacher can consider the relationship between the student's oral reading accuracy, rate, fluency, and comprehension. Does the student read fluently and accurately but fail to comprehend? Is a student making frequent substitutions but still comprehending? In addition, this measure can indicate a need for a further diagnostic comprehension assessment. Quantitative data is not the only important component of measuring comprehension. With any measure of comprehension – both that offered in PALS and that offered by other measures – the richness of the teacher's observations of the student interacting with comprehension questions is critical. How cogent were the student's predictions about what they were able to read/learn in the passage? Was there a pattern in the kinds of questions they got right and/or wrong? Did they always miss the vocabulary question? The inference question? The main idea question? How relevant were their responses? These qualitative observations provide information about students' skills specific to comprehension which can inform daily instruction.

## Level B Tasks

### **Why does PALS only assess lower-case alphabet recognition? What about upper-case letters?**

Based on research of over 50,000 kindergarten and first grade children, a ceiling effect was found on upper-case letter recognition (very few errors were made). A ceiling effect was not found for lower-case letter recognition.

### **Can I tell the child the name of the letter when giving the Letter Sounds task? For instance, can I say, "What sound does 'M' make?"**

You should not tell the student the letter name when administering the Letter Sounds task. Many letter names sound similar to the sounds they represent. Therefore, providing such assistance would not yield an accurate measure of the child's letter sound knowledge.

### **Why are uppercase letters used for the Letter Sounds task?**

Many lower-case letters have geometrically similar shapes and are easily confused by young children (i.e. b/d, p/q). Upper-case letters are more easily recognized, and will provide a more reliable measure of children's letter sound knowledge.

## Level C Tasks

### **What is the rationale for Level C tasks?**

Research has shown that a student's performance on blending tasks predicts how well s/he will read several years later (Wagner, Torgeson, Laughon, Simmons, & Rashotte, 1993)<sup>1</sup>. Research has also shown that difficulty with sound-to-letter, or segmenting, tasks is related to difficulty with alphabetic retrieval, and might inhibit written word learning. Level C tasks are provided to give in-depth information about what basic literacy skills may be lacking in students who are not meeting PALS benchmarks for their grade level, so that these specific needs can be addressed through instruction and practice.

### **I have students who were not required to take the Level B or C tasks, but I suspect they might have a problem with alphabets or phonemic awareness. What can I do?**

Please feel free to give Level B or Level C tasks to any of your students. Although you will not be required to report these scores, you can use this information for instructional purposes and can enter the scores in your PALS Online account for that student.

1 Wagner, R. K., Torgesen, J. K., Laughon, P., Simmons, K., & Rashotte, C. A. (1993). Development of young readers' phonological processing abilities. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85, 83–103.