

More Time on Data-Driven Instruction, Less Time on Assessments

With EarlyBird as their universal assessment, Dedham educators spend less time testing and more time delivering the targeted, high-impact instruction their students need.





For years, Dedham Public Schools (DPS) relied on a computer-adaptive early literacy screener — but it came up short. It didn't align well with new state dyslexia guidelines, didn't give teachers clear instructional next steps, and, most importantly, it wasn't helping them support all students.

A new approach to early literacy screening

“One of the things we found was that it wasn’t very teacher-friendly in terms of helping teachers understand the specific needs of their kindergarten students,” says Dr. Heather L. B. Smith, PK–8 Humanities Curriculum Coordinator at DPS. “We weren’t really using it to inform Tier 1 instruction.”

So DPS leaders decided to shift their approach and adopt EarlyBird*.

Why EarlyBird?

- Developed with experts at Boston Children’s Hospital and the Florida Center for Reading Research
- Provides a comprehensive early literacy screener aligned to the Mass Literacy Guide and Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines
- Offers fast, game-based assessments that kids enjoy — and teachers can trust

“They felt like they were playing a game. It’s developmentally friendly, and our teachers had a very positive experience with it,” says Smith.

Why it matters: The data is both comprehensive and usable. Teachers get a quick snapshot of student skills, paired with instructional resources for targeted support.

Less time testing, more time teaching

EarlyBird assesses areas such as naming speed, phonological awareness, sound-symbol correspondence, and oral language. It provides an overall risk score and visual dashboards teachers can act on immediately.

- “The fact that students can be so independent with EarlyBird was a huge selling point for us and helped with teacher buy-in,” says Smith. “Kindergarten teachers spend a lot of time assessing one-on-one, so being able to cut down that time is really helpful.”

Why it matters: Teachers are already seeing the benefits in the classroom. They’re adjusting instruction, identifying students for intervention earlier, and even saving time on other assessments.

Using data to strengthen Tier 1 instruction

After the fall screening, educators worked together to analyze their EarlyBird results and adjust instruction. During an in-service day, they:

- Reviewed student performance in subtests like letter names and sounds
- Identified class-wide trends to prioritize core instruction needs
- Used EarlyBird’s embedded instructional routines to plan literacy centers
- Integrated those routines into classroom schedules for daily use

Why it matters: This collaborative approach helped make data actionable and immediately relevant in the classroom.

Acting on data to support intervention

DPS also created a thoughtful, step-by-step process for using EarlyBird data to identify students who may be at risk and prioritize intervention:

- Conduct an initial review of subtests related to dyslexia risk (e.g., RAN, blending, non-word repetition)
- Narrow criteria to focus on specific early reading skills like letter name and sound knowledge
- Rank students based on need and place those with the highest risk into small group interventions

This process is repeated with each assessment window to layer in additional supports as students progress.

Professional learning that respects educators' time and expertise

Professional development with EarlyBird is collaborative — not one-size-fits-all. After each assessment, DPS teachers participate in PD sessions to:

- Deepen understanding of early reading skills
- Analyze class and student-level data
- Map targeted instructional strategies into classroom routines

Smith credits the EarlyBird team with supporting a more thoughtful rollout: “The EarlyBird staff is wonderful to work with, and the professional development has been really helpful. I appreciate having partners who are willing to look at the needs of our teachers and students rather than just provide a training that everybody gets.”

Making room for what matters

The shift to EarlyBird isn’t just about compliance or data — it’s about instructional clarity.

Now, teachers feel more confident using data to inform instruction, they’re building targeted routines aligned to student needs, and they’re finding time to teach, not just test.

“EarlyBird has prompted us to move away from a one-size-fits-all program to more targeted instruction and interventions that address the specific skill needs of our students,” says Smith.

**After this story was written, EarlyBird joined the Imagine Learning family of products as Imagine+ EarlyBird Screener.*



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