Understanding Parents' Interpretation and Use of Individual Student Score Reports

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Abstract

Score report feedback provides important consequential evidence for assessment programs. We collected and analyzed parent feedback on score report interpretation and use. Feedback revealed successes and challenges around effective interpretation and use of the score report design and suggested features for revision or redesign.

Author Note

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The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA et al., 2014) state that score reports should support valid interpretation and use of assessment results by stakeholders. For score reports to effectively communicate results with clear and actionable information, reports must be intentionally designed and include end users in the iterative development process (AERA et al., 2014; Zapata-Rivera & Katz, 2014; Zenisky & Hambleton, 2012). Because stakeholder groups vary in their needs, different audiences may differ in their opinions about score report features, language, and utility (Hopster-den Otter et al., 2017). Feedback from users should be collected and used, --ideally throughout multiple design and implementation cycles, --and should include users from key stakeholder groups (Brown et al., 2023; Slaton et al., 2019; Zapata-Rivera & Katz, 2014; Zenisky & Hambleton, 2012).

Collecting feedback from users of score reports can provide insight into how end users might interpret and use score reports. For instance, research with users from specific stakeholder groups (e.g., teachers, parents, administrators) have variously focused on report design layout, reporting sub-scores, reporting measurement error, interactions between the score report and the assessment's underlying measurement model, and how score reports can be used (Clark et al., 2022; Gotch & Roberts, 2018; Kannan et al., 2021; Karvonen et al., 2017; Zapata-Rivera et al., 2019).

Individual student score reports can be used by parents and educators to understand how students performed. While both groups may use score reports, their needs are likely different. For instance, educators might use results to determine the areas upon which to focus future instruction, to reflect on the effectiveness of particular instructional methods, or to identify student groupings for classroom activities (Clark et al., 2022, 2023; Kim et al., 2016). Parents may prefer overall information about student achievement or want to determine which skills to work with their child at home (Kannan et al., 2018). Over the last decade, score report research on parents' experiences has focused on understanding parent interpretation of achievement labels (O'Donnell & Sireci, 2022), evaluating language translation for parents (Rios & Ihlenfeldt, 2021) and examining the interpretation and use of hypothetical score reports (Kannan et al., 2018), including interpreting measurement error (Kannan et al., 2021). The present research extends research on evaluation of score reporting for parents by collecting parent feedback on the interpretability and usability of score reports.

Study Context

Dynamic Learning Maps® (DLM®) alternate assessments are administered in over 20 states for state accountability purposes. Assessments are delivered to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in grades 3-8 and high school. The assessments measure student achievement on alternate academic content standards, called Essential Elements; each standard is available at five complexity levels to provide all students access to grade-level academic content. Short assessments, called testlets, measure knowledge and skills for one standard; each testlet consists of an engagement activity and three to nine items.

The assessment is scored with diagnostic classification models (DCMs) to provide fine-grained results reporting. Districts receive individual student score reports, composed of two parts (see Figures 1 & 2), following their operational administration and are responsible for sharing reports with teachers and parents. The Performance Profile (Figure 1) shows overall student achievement in the subject and for groups of related content standards. The Learning Profile (Figure 2) shows student mastery of skills for each content standard. Score report distribution practices vary across states and districts; some districts print and mail the score reports to parents, others distribute the reports to teachers to give to parents (e.g., at conferences). Both parents and educators receive the same report; reports are not currently differentiated by user group.

The study evaluated two research questions:

1. What are parents' perceptions of score report interpretability?
2. What are parents' perceptions of score report usability?

Methods

We recruited parents and guardians of students who take DLM alternate assessments to participate in interview sessions that focused on how they interpret and might use score reports. We shared overview materials with DLM state partners, who identified parent information centers in their states that could support recruitment. Two interested centers in two states collaborated with us to share recruitment materials (in English and Spanish) with parents of students who take DLM assessments. Recruitment materials described the goal of the research study and invited parents to participate in a feedback session. Prospective participants completed an interest survey administered via Qualtrics and we used their survey responses to invite and schedule sessions.

Participants

We received completed interest surveys from 60 parents. We contacted all interested parents and were able to schedule feedback sessions with 23 parents. Of those, sixteen completed informed consent materials and attended a feedback session. Most participants were female *(n* = 14*),* white *(n* = 15*),* and had attended some college (*n* = 5) or a college degree or higher *(n* = 8). While we were prepared for parent sessions to be conducted in both English and Spanish, all participants indicated English was their preferred language. Most participants had a child in elementary (*n* = 8) or middle school (*n* = 6) or both *(n* = 2*);* only two parents had a child in high school. Most participants were unfamiliar with the report; many had not previously received one for their child or were unable to recall if they had received one. Two participants' children were in 3rd grade at the time of the study and had not yet completed the assessment (i.e., could not have received a report).

Procedure

Most feedback sessions were individual interviews, but three sessions each included two parents. Sessions followed a semi-structured approach, which consisted of a researcher-developed interview protocol that had guiding questions but allowed the interviewer flexibility to ask follow-up questions as needed. Prior to the session, we sent participants an example score report for a hypothetical student. The interview questions progressed from asking about specific sections of the report, towards capturing more global and holistic feedback on the report.

Participants received a $50 honorarium for participating. Audio recordings of sessions were transcribed by an external vendor.

Analysis

We developed a codebook from the research questions and grounded it in participants' responses. We refined our codebook using input from the research team coding transcripts about revisions that would make coding more efficient or better capture the range of feedback associated with the research questions. All coders used an early version of the codebook to code one session's transcript. We used an expansive coding approach (Saldaña, 2013) to capture all codes that applied to a participant's response. We then identified and discussed potential improvements to the codebook to reduce ambiguity and develop a shared understanding of how to apply the codes. This initial coding experience provided an opportunity for calibration and motivated edits to the codebook to promote agreement. After revising and finalizing the codebook, coders coded all session transcripts, including applying the revised codebook to the first transcript.

Every transcript was independently coded by two coders. We combined codes from the two coders and reviewed any discrepancies to reach consensus. Using Dedoose qualitative software (2024), we created a report from the coded segments of transcripts for each research question. Using these reports, we identified patterns and developed themes to capture results for both research questions.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

In conducting our research, we strove to draw insights and accurately capture patterns of responses from the feedback sessions. We recruited participants from two different states to surface a broad set of participant experiences. Multiple researchers facilitated feedback sessions and analyzed participants' responses. Through the development of a codebook and a dual-coding/consensus-building approach, we aimed to create a consistent and documented process for making meaning of the data. When we identify themes and patterns in the feedback, we include direct quotes from participants to capture their voice, and as support for the themes.

Positionality

The research team included the three coauthors, two other researchers, and additional support staff. The authors obtained their Ph.D. in Engineering psychology, Educational psychology, and Educational Leadership, respectively. One of the other researchers has multiple master's degrees in Special Education, Measurement, and Teaching. The other researcher has a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. Three members of the research team conducted interviews. All five researchers participated in developing the codebook and coding transcripts. Support staff members assisted with managing the logistics of interviews (e.g., scheduling, video conference software, etc.), assembling and compiling coded transcripts, and generating code reports using Dedoose. All members of the research team work on the DLM project. We acknowledge our program affiliation warrants interest in its success; however, our research agenda also prioritizes collection of stakeholder feedback to inform continuous programmatic improvements.

Findings

We organize findings based on our two research questions on interpretability and usability. We acknowledge that interpretability and usability are related and can impact one another, thus some of the findings have overlap.

Interpretability

We identified themes in the parent interpretability feedback pertaining to the levels of reporting and the language used on the report.

Levels of Reporting

Participants found the information describing overall performance on the assessment (i.e., top portion of Figure 1) informative and meaningful. Participants used the graphic to successfully identify the student's overall performance category (Emerging).

> *The little graph showing emerging, approaching, etc., that's helpful...The explanation of emerging and approaching and target and etc. [I] believe that would help anyone…I think it's pretty clear cut and very easy to read.*

Parents read through the Area results (i.e., bottom portion of Figure 1), but expressed some confusion about the hypothetical student's performance. Some participants were unsure which specific skills the student did (or did not) master when they read the bar graphs and summary statistics.

> *40% of what? Construction, understanding of text [ELA.C1.2], okay 40%. But what is he not up to? What did he miss? Integrate ideas, information from text [ELA.C1.3], 60%, 6 out of 10 skills. Okay, so I'm looking on the second page, and it says 60% mastered 6 out of 10 skills. That makes sense. That's where they got the 60% at. But where is he lacking, and could there be – like could there be a like a page that says here, he did 60% here, here is the 40% you need to work on?*

In the most fine-grain level of reporting, participants indicated that the detailed report (Figure 2) allowed them to determine the skills the student had mastered that year. Participants said the green color coding helped direct their attention to which skills that student had mastered.

> *I do like how it's…color coded…where those greens are showing…what they completed…under each area, I think that's kind of helpful for someone to…glance at and see what their child's got.*

However, the other color codes (i.e., blue and gray) were less clear and resulted in interpretation challenges. Participants questioned why a student would not have been tested on certain skills and whether a "no evidence of mastery" code meant that the student was not tested on that skill.

> *Where it says Essential Element not tested, … I would want to know why wasn't this tested. It may be because my child can't do it, and that's fine, or because it's a skill he'll never work on, and that's fine. But all I see is it wasn't tested. Well, I want to know why the school chose not to do that or the teacher chose not to do that. And the one where it says there's no evidence of mastery, if they tested it, I assume he's working on it. And if I don't see a result, I want to know what happened that there was no result.*

Language Used in the Report

Participants noted multiple instances where the terms and language used in the report were understandable and conveyed meaningful information. Participants frequently noted the descriptions of the student's overall performance and the four performance categories (e.g., emerging, approaching the target, etc.) were clear and easy to understand. Further, participants seemed to find the use of "mastery" and "mastered" in relation to a student's performance natural; they quickly adopted and used those terms when discussing the student's performance.

Parents had variable feedback on the descriptions of the Areas on the Performance Profile (Figure 1). Some participants indicated they were easy to understand.

> *Like how they [the text under each Area] described everything, like "Integrate ideas and information from text", things like that, yeah, that I understand fine.*

However, other participants expressed confusion around these descriptions.

> *Maybe some of these words just like "unambiguous". That's a word that I need to talk about after I've had my coffee. Maybe just clearer explanations for parents that don't use Google as much as me. Maybe break down these words a little bit…. Other than that yeah, maybe just some easier words to understand. "Identify the implicit main idea in an informational text". I'm not sure based on a parent's educational level if they would understand what these are. If they could be broken down a little bit easier maybe. …but like "associate word choice with textual meaning", stuff like that. I feel like maybe break it down into easier language if that's possible of what each one of these mean.*

Participants also mentioned the alphanumeric codes for Areas and Essential Elements (e.g., ELA.C1.1) throughout the report and noted that they did not know the meaning of those identifiers and would likely ignore them if they were reading the report on their own. For instance one described the codes in the Learning Profile portion of the report (Figure 2) as follows:

> *I think the notations on the left side there, the ELA.C1.1, blah, blah, blah, that doesn't mean anything to most people and they're not even going to look at that.*

While parent understanding of score report terms and notations is an important aspect of interpretability, parents did not describe these areas of confusion as detracting from their understanding of how the student performed on the assessment.

Usability

Participants found the performance and skill mastery information in the score report useful. They described that it could help them understand the types of skills being worked on at school and how the child performed on those skills.

> *So, a document like this could be better for me understanding him and what's going on in his class or…individually…*

Parents described finding the structure of the report useful for identifying what to work on at home, due to the standards showing the five levels.

> *I would find it very useful, that way I would know exactly where his help is needed. Because it kind of breaks it down*.

Parents used the mastery information to identify the student's current level and where they needed to go next.

> *It's easy to see the learning standards and then where this student or my child would fall and then to then see like next steps or things that need to be worked on, so I think that this page [Learning Profile] is very helpful.*

Participants found information about their child's mastery useful and helped them identify academic goals that would enable them to see progress over time.

> *Our family's goal isn't necessarily that she has an on-target master of any specific learning standard, but just that we see progress from year to year*.

Further, participants noted that the score report could help them in meetings with their child's educators and believed information in the reports could be useful for others working with their child (e.g., speech therapists, etc.).

> *...I have him in speech therapy and occupational and physical, so [I would] find out if there's something in any of those that we could work into his therapies.*

Although most parents found the report useful, some indicated a desire for enhancements that could support usability, such as including example questions and more detailed descriptions of the specific skills that were assessed.

Discussion

Parent feedback sessions provided important insights into how they consume information in score reports. We identified features that both aided and detracted from score report interpretation and use. Generally, participants found overall information about student achievement clear and useful. Because information about overall achievement is one of the primary types of information parents seek from score reports (Kannan et al., 2018), it is promising that parents found these terms easy to understand. Prior studies have emphasized the importance of selecting terms that accurately describe student achievement, are informative and encouraging, and conveyed using appropriate tone (O'Donnell & Sireci, 2021). Test developers should carefully consider the terms used to describe achievement across the range of audiences receiving reports. While measurement programs tend to consider achievement descriptors for standard setting purposes (e.g., Perie, 2008), they may not give the same consideration to parent interpretability of the terms used.

Parents similarly described the ease with which they interpreted mastery shading on the Learning Profile and easily adopted language describing mastery of skills. This is an important finding given the limited number of programs operationally scoring assessments with diagnostic classification models that produce mastery determinations. While previous research has identified that educators easily interpret and use mastery status information (e.g., Clark et al., 2022, 2023; Feldberg & Bradshaw, 2019), we know of no current research evaluating parent use of mastery-based score reports from assessments scored with diagnostic classification models. Similarly, because parents identify wanting to know specific areas to support their child's learning at home, diagnostic score reports show promise for providing fine grained information that is both interpretable and usable by parents.

Feedback sessions also identified areas for improvement. Parents expressed mixed opinions about the language used to describe specific skills (i.e., the Learning Profile) and sets of related skills (i.e., the Area section of Performance Profile). The differing opinions on the ease of understanding those descriptions might reflect the varied backgrounds of participants, and how their prior experiences and knowledge affect their interpretation. To fit in the available reporting space, descriptors for skills and sets of skills have character limits and use concise language, which may impact interpretation when additional context would be useful to parent audiences. Further, reports use the language of the academic standards adopted by the states to support educator use, but for parents, the language may be formal and unfamiliar (e.g., "ELA.C1.3: Integrate Ideas and Information from Text"). Additionally, the report uses alphanumeric codes from the content standards that are also reflected in blueprint documents, manuals and trainings, and the online system. While these codes may be familiar for educators,

parents who do not access blueprints and other administration materials were not able to construct meaning from them. While suboptimal, until differentiating reports by audience is supported, the program has accepted that parents may continue to ignore those codes without it overly detracting from overall interpretation and use.

In addition to feedback on the current structure of reports, parents also identified information in the report that they found useful and noted additional information that they would value if it were included in the score report. We also learned that most parents were unfamiliar with the score reports, which is likely not unique to this assessment program. This feedback is useful to collect as part of the program's continuous improvement plan and will be considered for future development and implementation efforts. We encourage other programs to similarly collect feedback from parents to inform their report delivery, including evaluating delivery systems and how readily parents can access reports on their own (e.g., Zapata-Rivera & Katz, 2014), rather than relying on district or teacher delivery.

We acknowledge that we had a small sample of parents from two states representing students taking alternate assessments. Many parents had college degrees and largely identified as white and female. We recognize the sample is not representative of the full population of parents. Nevertheless, we believe the current study advances the limited body of research on parent interpretation and use of score reports and that the present findings will be informative to other programs, particularly as they consider sources of consequential validity evidence (AERA et al., 2014). More and continued research that captures feedback from various end-users can surface unmet audience needs and improve communication and use of score results.

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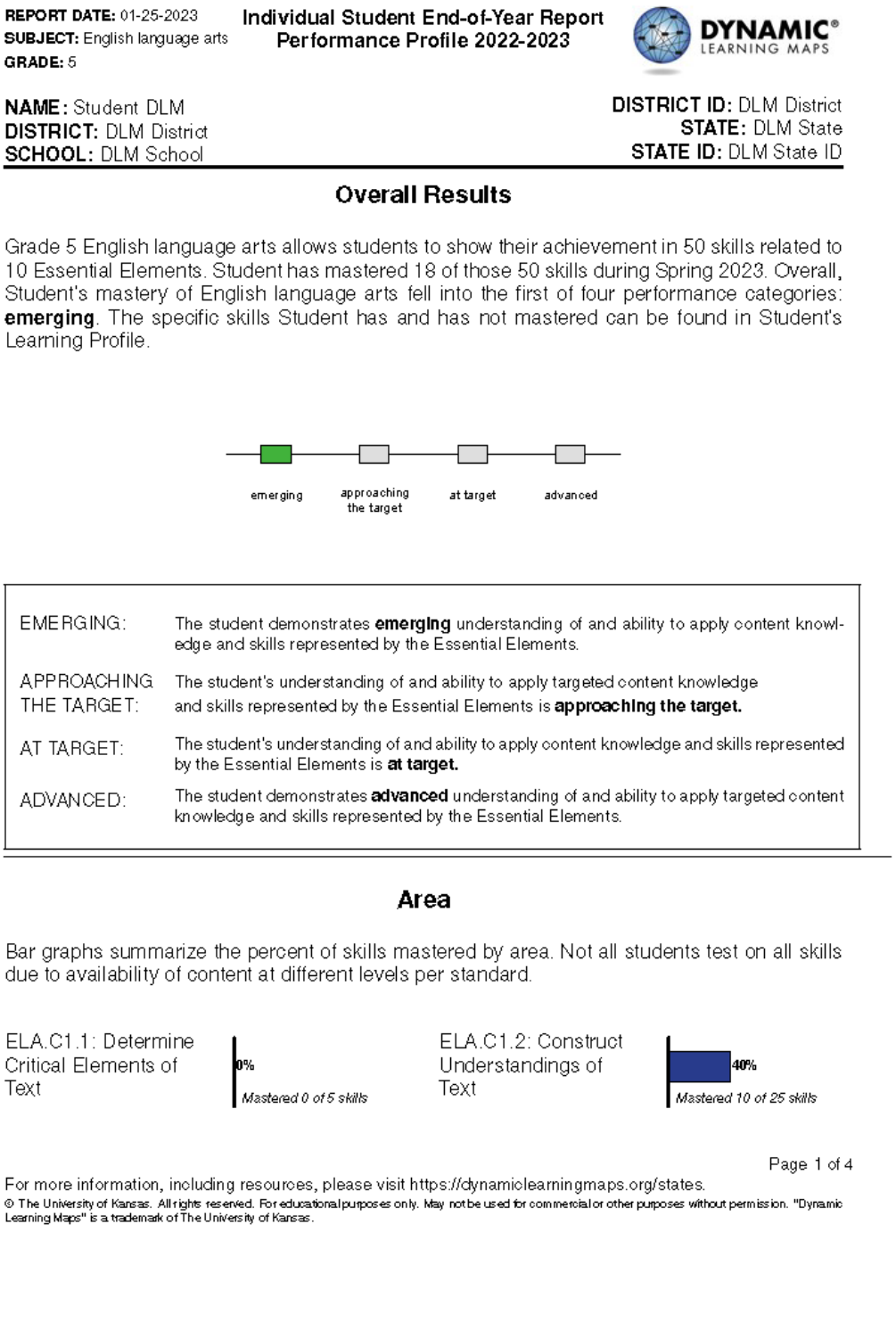
Figure 1. First part of the individual score report (the Performance Profile) showing the student's overall results and summaries of their skill mastery in each area.



REPORT DATE: 01-25-2023
SUBJECT: English language arts
GRADE: 5

Individual Student End-of-Year Report
Performance Profile 2022-2023

DYNAMIC® LEARNING MAPS

NAME: Student DLM
DISTRICT: DLM District
SCHOOL: DLM School

DISTRICT ID: DLM District
STATE: DLM State
STATE ID: DLM State ID

Overall Results

Grade 5 English language arts allows students to show their achievement in 50 skills related to 10 Essential Elements. Student has mastered 18 of those 50 skills during Spring 2023. Overall, Student's mastery of English language arts fell into the first of four performance categories: **emerging**. The specific skills Student has and has not mastered can be found in Student's Learning Profile.

EMERGING:	The student demonstrates **emerging** understanding of and ability to apply content knowledge and skills represented by the Essential Elements.
APPROACHING THE TARGET:	The student's understanding of and ability to apply targeted content knowledge and skills represented by the Essential Elements is **approaching the target.**
AT TARGET:	The student's understanding of and ability to apply content knowledge and skills represented by the Essential Elements is **at target.**
ADVANCED:	The student demonstrates **advanced** understanding of and ability to apply targeted content knowledge and skills represented by the Essential Elements.

Area

Bar graphs summarize the percent of skills mastered by area. Not all students test on all skills due to availability of content at different levels per standard.

ELA.C1.1: Determine Critical Elements of Text

ELA.C1.2: Construct Understandings of Text

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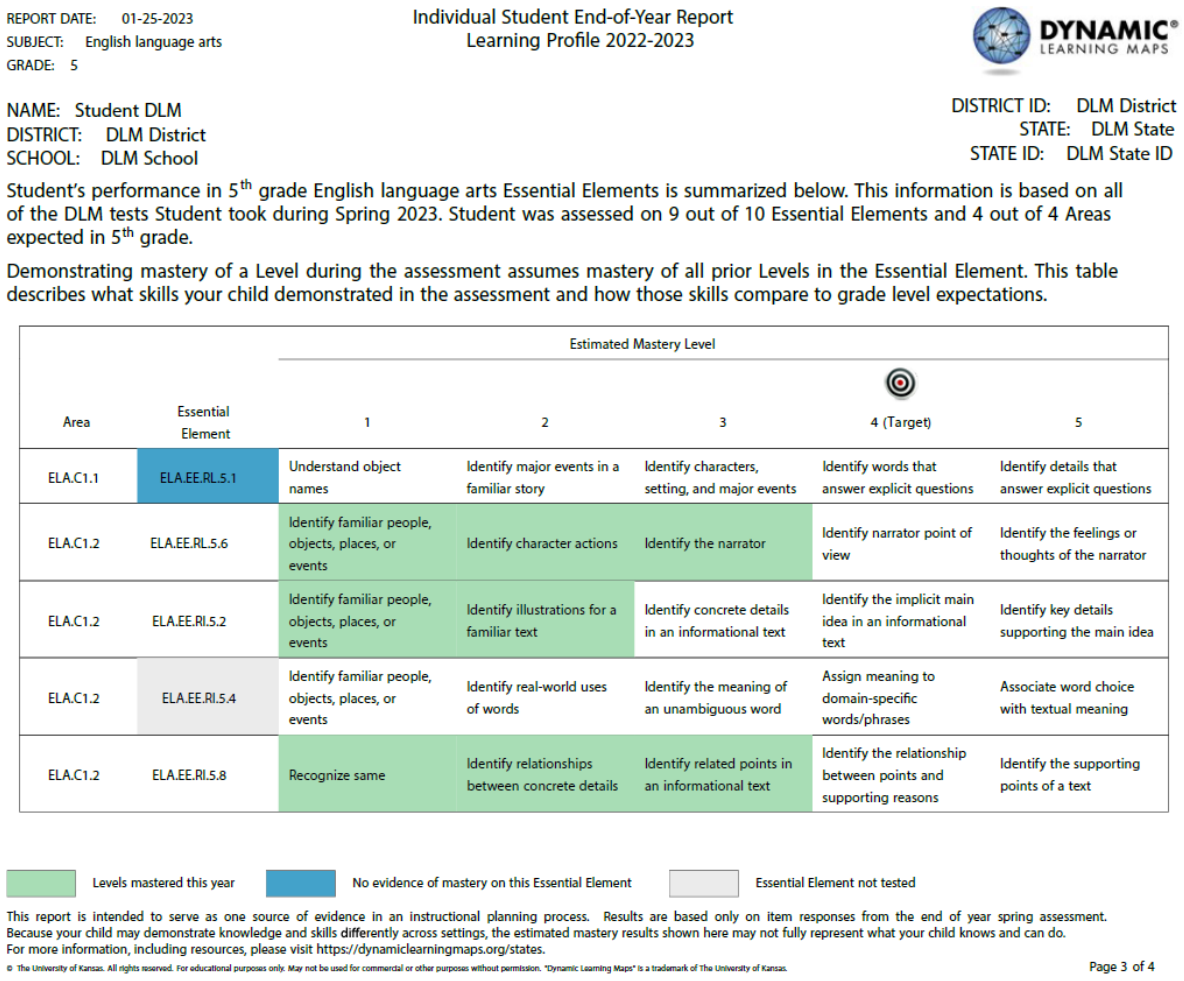
For more information, including resources, please visit https://dynamiclearningmaps.org/states.

Figure 2. Second part of the score report (the Learning Profile), which displays the student's mastery status on skills measuring the standard (called Essential Elements).



REPORT DATE: 01-25-2023
SUBJECT: English language arts
GRADE: 5

Individual Student End-of-Year Report
Learning Profile 2022-2023

DYNAMIC LEARNING MAPS

NAME: Student DLM
DISTRICT: DLM District
SCHOOL: DLM School

DISTRICT ID: DLM District
STATE: DLM State
STATE ID: DLM State ID

Student's performance in 5th grade English language arts Essential Elements is summarized below. This information is based on all of the DLM tests Student took during Spring 2023. Student was assessed on 9 out of 10 Essential Elements and 4 out of 4 Areas expected in 5th grade.

Demonstrating mastery of a Level during the assessment assumes mastery of all prior Levels in the Essential Element. This table describes what skills your child demonstrated in the assessment and how those skills compare to grade level expectations.

		Estimated Mastery Level				
Area	Essential Element	1	2	3	4 (Target)	5
ELA.C1.1	ELA.EE.RL.5.1	Understand object names	Identify major events in a familiar story	Identify characters, setting, and major events	Identify words that answer explicit questions	Identify details that answer explicit questions
ELA.C1.2	ELA.EE.RL.5.6	Identify familiar people, objects, places, or events	Identify character actions	Identify the narrator	Identify narrator point of view	Identify the feelings or thoughts of the narrator
ELA.C1.2	ELA.EE.RI.5.2	Identify familiar people, objects, places, or events	Identify illustrations for a familiar text	Identify concrete details in an informational text	Identify the implicit main idea in an informational text	Identify key details supporting the main idea
ELA.C1.2	ELA.EE.RI.5.4	Identify familiar people, objects, places, or events	Identify real-world uses of words	Identify the meaning of an unambiguous word	Assign meaning to domain-specific words/phrases	Associate word choice with textual meaning
ELA.C1.2	ELA.EE.RI.5.8	Recognize same	Identify relationships between concrete details	Identify related points in an informational text	Identify the relationship between points and supporting reasons	Identify the supporting points of a text

Levels mastered this year | No evidence of mastery on this Essential Element | Essential Element not tested

This report is intended to serve as one source of evidence in an instructional planning process. Results are based only on item responses from the end of year spring assessment. Because your child may demonstrate knowledge and skills differently across settings, the estimated mastery results shown here may not fully represent what your child knows and can do.
For more information, including resources, please visit https://dynamiclearningmaps.org/states.

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