

# Virginia Language & Literacy Screening System

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## Introduction

Literacy achievement is tied not only to improved outcomes in all academic areas, but also to higher rates of employment and overall improved life expectancy.<sup>1</sup> Because students who have difficulties in reading during elementary school are likely to continue to have reading difficulties later in life,<sup>2</sup> it is important to screen for reading difficulties early so that schools can provide adequate instruction and intervention to reduce students' risk. The National Reading Panel (NRP) identified a set of five key skills that are necessary for the development of strong readers: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.<sup>3</sup> There is strong evidence that demonstrates the importance of developing word-level skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding), in tandem with developing vocabulary and oral language skills in order to successfully comprehend written text.<sup>4</sup> As such, to comprehend written text, individuals must be able to decode written symbols into spoken language (e.g., "sounding out" words). They must then apply their language skills (e.g., vocabulary, knowledge of syntactic structures, background knowledge) to understand the meaning of the decoded text. Additionally, processing speed is a factor associated with reading development.<sup>5</sup> The Virginia Language & Literacy Screening System (VALLSS) contains subtests to measure decoding (word reading), linguistic (language) skills, and rapid naming (processing speed).

The purpose of VALLSS is two-fold. First, scores can be used to identify students at risk for reading difficulties. Additionally, the screener serves as a measure of both foundational literacy skills and oral language development, which are predictive of later literacy achievement, allowing educators to design instruction that can improve reading and literacy achievement.

## *Virginia Language & Literacy Screener: Kindergarten*

### Domains and Subtests

#### *Code-based Subtests*

**Alphabet Knowledge:** Students' understanding of the alphabetic code is measured through *Letter Names*, in which children identify the names of printed letters, and *Letter Sounds*, in which students identify the sounds of printed letters. Alphabet knowledge, including knowledge of the sounds of printed letters, is a critical component of students' early literacy skills. Young children's alphabetic knowledge has been shown to be a strong predictor of their later reading and spelling abilities.<sup>6</sup> Understanding the systematic and predictable relationship, or code, for letter-sound correspondence is essential for word reading development. Research supports the conceptualization of alphabet knowledge as a unitary construct and suggests combining alphabetic tasks in assessments.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, both upper- and lowercase letters appear in the alphabet knowledge subtests.

**Phonological Awareness:** Students' phonological awareness abilities are measured through a series of subtests: *Beginning Sounds Expressive*, in which children provide the beginning sound of a word; *Phoneme Blending*, in which children blend series of individual sounds into whole words; and *Phoneme Segmenting*, in which students divide words into individual phonemes (or sounds). Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate the units of sound in a spoken language; awareness of the sounds in spoken language is an essential part of learning letter sound correspondence which is necessary for word reading and spelling. Research has demonstrated that students' early phonological awareness is a predictor of learning to read in an alphabetic written language system such as English.<sup>8</sup>

**Decoding:** Students' decoding ability is measured through two subtests, *Real Word Decoding*, in which the students are asked to read real, decodable words from a list, and *Pseudoword Decoding*, in which students are asked to read pretend words which still follow typical decodable spelling patterns. Word reading ability in the early elementary grades is a strong predictor of later reading achievement.<sup>9</sup> Nonsense words (or pseudowords) allow us to assess whether a student has mastered phonics skills and can decode automatically without drawing on memory.<sup>10</sup>

**Encoding:** Students' encoding ability is measured through the *Encoding* subtest, which is a group administered assessment, in which students are asked to spell words that are read aloud. The ability to correctly identify the grapheme (letter) that is matched to a phoneme (sound) is an essential skill for fluent reading and can be assessed through encoding ability.<sup>11</sup> This subtest can be administered in a group setting, where each student silently writes on their own sheet of paper the words read aloud.

### **Language Subtests**

**Passage Comprehension:** Passage comprehension is assessed by two subtests utilizing the same passage. First, for *Passage Retell*, an optional subtest, a student is read a passage aloud and then retells the passage using the same set of illustrations. *Passage Retell* is scored on the student's ability to include story elements and use rich vocabulary and syntax. Second, on the *Expressive Comprehension Questions*, students give an oral response to questions about the passage. Asking students to retell a story is an accurate and frequently used measure of narrative language abilities.<sup>12</sup> Reconstructing and interpreting narratives (i.e., retelling and answering comprehension questions) have been found to be a strong indicator of students' reading comprehension.<sup>13</sup>

**Nonsense Sentences:** For *Nonsense Sentences*, students repeat sentences varying in both length and grammatical complexity. Therefore, if students do not, for example, correctly repeat a plural noun when presented by the examiner, it is unlikely that they correctly use plurals in their everyday speech. This subtest gives educators an indication of which grammatical structures a student has in their repertoire. Students' ability to repeat nonsense sentences has been shown to reflect the grammatical structures they use correctly in conversational speech.<sup>14</sup>

**Vocabulary:** Vocabulary is assessed through two subtests. For *Relational Vocabulary*, a student views a grid of four pictures and is asked to point to the picture that matches the verbal label, which includes a relational word. Relational words are terms that can only be understood in reference to another concept or object such as *alongside, throughout, equal, and different*. Relational words support children's general cognition and reasoning, mathematical thinking, and literacy skills.<sup>15</sup> During the *Vocabulary Fluency* subtest, students are asked to accurately name as many images of objects as quickly as possible in one minute. Picture naming has been used to examine lexical access in children<sup>16</sup> where slower processing speeds have been assumed to reflect limitation in processing capacity and resources, including less rapid access to object names.<sup>17</sup>

### Processing Subtest

**Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN):** For *RAN: Letters*, students name the letters they see on the page as quickly as possible. This is a measure of students' processing speed. Examiners record the number of letters the student can correctly label in the array of 50 within one minute. RAN measures have been shown to be a predictor of later reading fluency, as fluent reading requires students to quickly recognize letters, their associated sounds, and then blend them with other sounds as part of word reading.<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

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