Once again, the 5th grade student sat there frantically trying to get the sounds right. It seemed that, no matter how hard he tried, he could not get the words out of his mouth fast enough to get a passing score on the DIBELS test. His teachers realized he was older than most students who take the DIBELS, but in spite of this they felt it was appropriate to use with him, given that his reading skills were still way below grade level. Besides, no other assessment had been approved for use within their Reading First grant. DIBELS was approved and so the teachers could breathe easier knowing they were in compliance.

The 5th grader’s low score targeted him as a high risk for failure. His parents were notified that he should not be allowed to move on to the next grade level because of the DIBELS results and because the intensive phonics instruction recommended as an intervention had clearly not produced the desired results. Why wasn’t the “science of phonics” working with this student?

The answer is that this 5th grader is deaf and therefore incapable of hearing letter-sound relationships. This deaf child, along with many others, has repeatedly been tested with DIBELS and labeled a failure – all in the name of complying with Reading First. Incredible as it may seem, this is not an isolated example. Similar testing practices are under way in numerous states, including Florida, Vermont, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Michigan, and Alabama, in both mainstreamed and residential special education settings.

Now we know why. An investigation by the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Education, released in September 2006, revealed conflicts of interest in the $1 billion-a-year Reading First program, whose “expert review panel” was stacked with a select group of publishers and consultants, including the creators of DIBELS.

Under the guise of promoting “research based” educational practices, DIBELS and Reading First have defined fluency as speed reading while equating phonics with reading ability. In fact, neither proposition is scientifically supported, and both put deaf children at a huge disadvantage, as compared with other students, because of DIBELS’s strong emphasis on these two skills. Moreover, because of increased pressure to utilize DIBELS as the sole measure of reading ability, along with increased pressure to teach to the test, deaf students are denied valid assessment measures and instructional approaches that could provide a more accurate picture of their reading skills or potential.

Fluency in reading means the ability to comprehend a text with a certain level of automaticity. Fluency does not equate with how fast students can identify a letter or a

*DIBELS is the acronym for Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills.*
word. There are many instances where the contents of a story require a pause for emphasis or effect. Fluent readers recognize this as they encounter text and adjust their pace to match what is happening in the story. Teaching children that reading means identifying words rapidly because that’s what you will be tested on inhibits their learning of deeper levels of proficient reading skills. Trying to get deaf students to rapidly vocalize sounds they are incapable of hearing is a ridiculous waste of valuable instructional time, which they cannot afford to lose.

Granted, phonics skills are part of the tool kit that many fluent readers utilize to make sense of text they read. But phonics ability does not define reading ability. At its core, reading is comprehending whatever you encounter in print, however you do it. There are many deaf adults and children who are proficient readers in English who do not rely on phonics to understand text. Rather, they use their knowledge in American Sign Language (ASL) to make sense of written English. Proficient deaf readers focus on phrases rather than single words or letters because it often takes three to four English words to illustrate an action that requires only one sign in ASL. For example, the phrases “He got up” or “She skipped down the street” are each represented by a single ASL sign. In view of this linguistic reality, how can reading instruction that focuses on letters or words in isolation bring deaf children to higher levels of comprehension in reading? How can DIBELS be an accurate predictor of their reading potential?

DIBELS and Reading First operate on the premise that deaf students must discard their deafness and become “good little hearing children.” They expect these students to abandon the signed language they use to make sense of the world – and to make sense of English print – while stressing the one skill deaf children cannot even access. Because of their narrow definition of what constitutes reading, DIBELS and Reading First set these children up for failure before they even enter our school system.

Historically, deaf children represent one of the most disenfranchised and marginalized groups in our education system. The current “scientifically based” approaches that Reading First mandates in the name of accountability will not bring the deaf student to proficient literacy. Measuring the sounds of silence that represent the world of the deaf child is an exercise in futility that none can afford. Every minute of school is crucial for them. Indeed, forcing DIBELS and phonics instruction on deaf students who cannot access sound stops just shy of government-sponsored child abuse on a massive scale.

When will we end a policy that creates huge profits for a select few at the expense of our students? When will we have the courage to recognize the damage being done and do something about it? When will education return to real teaching and assessment for learning? Our children await our response.