



TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

VOICES FROM THE FIELD, 2

JANUARY 19, 2026

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Voices from the Field with Sherry Sousa, Superintendent of Schools

Welcome to our second edition of our intermittent series, *Vermont Voices from the Field*. Professionals offer their perspectives on implementing evidence-aligned literacy practices in their own classrooms, schools, or university programs. In this edition, we feature **Sherry Sousa**, Superintendent of Mountain Views Supervisory Union, interviewed by **Dr. Julie Brown** for The Reading League Vermont.

If you are interested in getting involved as one of Vermont's voices, please email Dr. Warren at: brenda@vt.thereadingleague.org.

Julie Brown: What is your background in reading and writing education? What was your own literacy education like in school? What have you learned since then in your higher-education studies and/or career?

Sherry Sousa: I earned my Master's at the University of Arizona and two of my professors were Ken and Yetta Goodman. I really came from that model of literacy instruction. That was one of the top three programs in the country at that time. In the early 1980s, I brought that philosophy of instruction to one of the most expensive private schools in the country for students with learning disabilities. I was faced with students who had severe dyslexia and other learning disabilities, and we hadn't landed on what made a difference for them. I was very involved at this school in developing their specific program for language-based learning disabilities, including theory and curriculum focused on speech strategies and written

Sherry Sousa has dedicated her career to working with adolescents with disabilities. In her many capacities serving the Mountain Views Supervisory Union (MSVU), Sherry has focused on providing students with learning differences opportunities to grow and remain in their home communities. Under her leadership, the role of an MVSU special educator was reimaged as Learning Specialist. This focus on instruction reduced the number of students receiving special education services from 17% to 11%. She has co-authored three books on nonverbal learning disabilities and has presented throughout the Northeast on this topic.

For the last five years, Sherry has had the privilege of serving as MVSU's Superintendent. She has welcomed the opportunity to engage with an outstanding staff on behalf of her students and their communities. Sherry is committed to improving educational equity and sees literacy as a key component of that work.

expression, which would inform both our reading and our writing instruction. I was fortunate to be at this school – it was a pivotal experience that shifted my understanding of what effective reading instruction entails.

Personally, I found learning to read a challenge. I had no phonemic awareness and was a 100% sight word reader. But going to the library was like going to Disneyland for me. We didn't have a lot of resources, but my mom would bring us to the big city library – I remember getting to visit the cabinet with the key to get the special books.

JB: What are the similarities and differences between what you learned initially and what you now find in current reading research? Was there a pivotal experience that caused you to shift your understanding of effective reading instruction? How has this affected how you teach today, K-12 students, undergraduate and graduate students, teachers?

SS: I have been in public education for a long time. Every initiative we had tried did not result in significant or meaningful gains in reading scores. I remember sitting in the high school library with the principal, looking at data. Once again, despite all our efforts, nothing had changed in terms of outcomes. This meant that we had to do something radically different. After visiting every single literacy classroom at the elementary level in our district with our superintendent, we realized there was a wide diversity of practices and strategies used across the district. We focused on aligning materials, but once again our scores were not changing despite the fact that we had invested so much money in materials and coaching.

So, we tried again, this time following the science of reading. We started training our teachers. They then were the ones telling me, “We have to do something different.” And they were speaking about “we” with a capital W and a capital E. That’s when change began in our classroom practices. We were reaching a critical mass of informed teachers demanding evidence-aligned materials and training. Our district never gave up, nor will we, in our search for instructional materials and approaches that make a difference.

In my 32 years with this district, seeing students walk across the stage who I knew were not functionally literate was heart-crushing. Despite all our efforts, I felt like we failed those students. So we started a secondary-level structured-literacy program. I remember one of our first years working with one of our most challenging students. His mom told me that her son was reading bumper stickers and signs as he was coming into school. He had told her that he was starting to get this whole reading thing. That’s when I knew we had found the secret sauce to making a difference.

Learning disabilities and emotional difficulties often go hand in hand, and we can’t work on one challenge and ignore the other. My first role in public education was with emotionally disturbed students. I realized very quickly that my students identified as emotionally disturbed were not really emotionally disturbed so much as they were functionally illiterate. As I always note, it’s better to be the jerk than to be the stupid kid. It’s better to blow out and flip a desk than to ask for help with reading. These students are experts at hiding their shame and protecting themselves

Curious Question: Which words have the most idiom phrases?



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from experiencing it.

JB: What are your goals now as a leader in literacy education?

SS: My leadership goal is to continue the work. The piece that we had been missing and that we need to continue monitoring is our accountability. Are we living up to the expectations we've established? Are we making sure that we continue to come together as a group of instructional leaders and reflect upon what we're doing? Are we making sure we're not missing any pieces? Outside of this district, I want to inform superintendents, the Agency of Education, and State Legislators that improving reading at a meaningful scale is possible. It is not cost prohibitive. It is our responsibility. For too long, there have been too many excuses for why better outcomes can't happen in Vermont, or can't happen for our historically marginalized students.

JB: At this point in time, what should Vermont's priorities in literacy education be?

SS: One example of what can happen in Vermont is our strong scores and student outcomes. Your zip code should not determine your outcomes in Vermont, or anywhere else. At Woodstock Union Middle and High Schools, we have 28 economically-diverse communities represented. We are focused on supporting all our student groups to see significant growth in outcomes.

Low levels of proficiency in literacy and mathematics have been tolerated in Vermont. Until we have higher standards of accountability for student outcomes, we will continue to falter. Right now, decisions are being made by

legislators who serve the adults. They are not necessarily serving students. We are stuck in supervisory unions that do not have the same high level of accountability as school districts.

I hold us as a prime example of that. Transforming from a supervisory union to a school district was difficult, but worth every single moment of struggle. Why? Because we have demonstrated what a school district can do to change student outcomes and, in turn, change students' lives. When we were operating as a supervisory union, we had eight different school boards. There was one school board member for every four students! School board members were not focused on governance and policy. Now, as a district, I can meet with my 18-member board, and we can have high-level conversations around instructional practices, school policy, resource allocation, and build a collective understanding of how to move forward. Now, the superintendent, our director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, our literacy and math facilitators, and our dedicated principals, department heads, and educators are leading the work. That was not happening when we had the eight different school boards. We now have one budget, one contract, one calendar, and one director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These are a few of the pieces that have led us to improve student outcomes. Now, students have access to the same evidence-based curricula across our district. And they have teachers with the same level of high-quality professional development.

"Our teachers deserve to be better prepared to teach all learners, and our students deserve teachers with this knowledge base."

- Sherry Sousa

JB: What would you like to see your newly hired teachers come to your district prepared to teach?

SS: Our new teachers are not prepared to teach in a professional, 21st century, public-school environment. Vermont school districts are owning the responsibility and paying for bringing them up to par as far as their knowledge base goes. It is incredibly disappointing when I see the resumes and coursework that our new teachers are engaged in. Literacy instruction is among the most important work of schools, and new teachers are simply not prepared to be successful. And because they're not prepared, Vermont districts have to pay for the professional development, supervision, and coaching that they should have already received. I feel for these teachers. It's not their fault. It is the fault of higher education for not offering the kinds of coursework that will be transformative in literacy and mathematics.

JB: What role do you think superintendents could play in moving that needle at the higher-education levels?

SS: We don't have the levers to influence the legislature and their purse strings. We have tried to design our own professional pathways for MVSU teachers, and we have tried to speak with Vermont's teacher-preparation programs. But our efforts and discussions have been dismissed. I think we are at the point where change has to happen at the legislative level in terms of accountability for colleges. Our teachers deserve to be better prepared to teach all learners, and our students deserve teachers with this knowledge base. Experience has shown me that lawmakers have the levers that we don't.

JB: What else would you like Vermonters to know about literacy education in our state?

SS: I would like to communicate that the work is a worthy investment. The work to ensure all teachers have a high level of professional development, that we have expert coaches, and that we pay our teachers at a level that respects the work they're doing is a worthy investment. I will say that our cost-per-pupil, while above certain averages, is what it costs to achieve high levels of proficiency in mathematics, literacy, and science.

JB: What would you like educators to understand about data?

SS: I'm currently mentoring a new superintendent. They're calling out the fact that data teams are missing from their schools and that educators commonly dismiss data as not representative of the whole child. While this may be true to a degree, we must remember that data reflect proficiency in skills that directly impact our students' individual outcomes and the future wellbeing of our communities. We must remember that literacy and mathematics are tightly wound with our students' sense of self. If we don't address one, we can't address the other. When students perform at the lowest levels, that is telling us something seriously profound. And once a child loses confidence, how do you rebuild it? Once she feels shame, how do you undo that? That's a lifelong experience.

That's why I'm so proud to work with the educators at Mountain Views Supervisory Union. They set ambitious goals for our students' achievement and then worked together to achieve them. Once our educators appreciated the links between literacy and equity, that moved the conversation forward. The impact of having a literate student body cannot be overstated.

When students can say, “I’m a reader, I’m a writer,” that school is transformed. That’s what data represents.

We can't stop teaching literacy in 3rd grade. Like any muscle, literacy has to be exercised. Students need experiences reading meaningful texts and books, understanding character development and motivations. However, many of our older students need continued instruction in the skills that will allow them access to grade-level content. That’s what the data is telling us. Evidence-based, effective literacy instruction needs to be visible in every single grade level, not just K-3. At MVSU, we are responding to our data with a PreK-12 lens.

JB: How do you think MVSU’s initiative towards evidence-based practices in reading instruction impacts our most successful students?

SS: I think it is important to acknowledge that many of our students in AP classes, and who are scoring high in terms of other skills, are also struggling with literacy. That is what our data and experience are telling us. I'll take my daughter as an example. She aced the SAT, majored in journalism at RIT, and graduated college with honors. To this day, she will say that she is a poor reader. She's not fluent and feels like every time she opens a book, she has to work harder than others. Research also supports this notion that high-school graduates and college-bound students have unfinished literacy learning. So, I really feel like, even for our “top students,” we have an ongoing obligation to provide them with effective instruction. All students deserve that instruction so that they can open any book or text with confidence and feel the self-esteem that comes from identifying as a reader and writer. That’s the game-changing goal.

Answer to this issue’s **Curious Question:**

Kress and Fry (2016) share words with the **most idiom phrases**. Here are just a few of the dozens attached to these starting words (p. 133-134).

come: *come alive, come a long way, come clean, come down on, come up to, come to think of it*

get: *get away with, get into, get on someone’s nerves, get around to, get up and go, get ahead*

go: *go all out, go off the deep end, go on, go over, go back on one’s promise, go through, go to bat for*

keep: *keep up, keep your word, keep your head above water, keep it down, keep one’s nose clean*

make: *make hay, make a run for it, make over, make friends, make up for, make fun of, make sense of*

take: *take a shower, take it easy, take for granted, take note of, take the cake, take a breather*

under: *under one’s breath, under the weather, under one’s nose, under the sun, under wraps*

Meet the Writer and Editors



Dr. Julie Brown is the founding teacher of Woodstock Union Middle and High School's Structured Literacy Program. She has taught in a variety of roles, including structured-literacy teacher, special educator, literacy facilitator, and multilingual learners coordinator for the Mountain Views Supervisory Union. In addition, Julie is a founding member of the Project for Adolescent Literacy (PAL), a not-for-profit advocacy organization created by educators for educators working with older struggling readers. PAL seeks to identify what works and tell the stories of systems, teachers, and students experiencing success.

Julie holds a Doctorate in Education from Mount St. Joseph University's Reading Science program and a Master of Science in Education Degree in Language and Literacy from Simmons College. Her students are her inspiration.

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction*.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.



Reference

Kress, J. E. & Fry, E. B. (2016). *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists*. Jossey-Bass.