



TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

UNPACKING READING FLUENCY

VOL. 6, NO. 1

JUNE 8, 2026

Improving Reading Fluency and Comprehension with Repeated Reading

An Interview with Vermont Teacher
Charlene Webster, M.S.Ed.

In this issue, Dorinne Dorfman interviews Charlene Webster, a retired educator who served for over forty years in Vermont public schools as an elementary teacher, special educator, and reading specialist.

Dorinne Dorfman: *Briefly, what is your background in teaching reading?*

Charlene Webster: When I first started teaching, I certainly considered myself a reading teacher. All elementary educators teach reading, and much of our day is surrounded by reading activities. It was only when I earned my Master's at Simmons College in 2004 that I realized my approach to reading instruction needed to change. Completing that program is when I truly became a reading teacher. Prior to that program, I had been using activities from popular sources such as Lucy Calkins' Reading Workshop and Writing Workshop. My colleagues and I would have discussions on why we had so many students who were not able to read at grade level. What weren't we doing to make this happen? We went to many workshops and enrolled in graduate-level courses to learn how to improve our instruction. But none of these methods moved the needle on teaching our students to read.

In the early 2000s, Simmons College developed a Language and Literacy Master's of Education program. Through The Reading Institute in Williamstown, MA, founded by Janet Stratton, this program of studies was brought to a location close enough for me to attend. That program changed my approach to reading instruction and ultimately the trajectory of my career. When I graduated, I was hired by Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington. Two other Simmons graduates from this program and I created a Literacy Lab at the high school, which continues today. We worked with many, many struggling teenagers and taught them to read. None of this would have happened if I had not pursued the knowledge of the why and the how of evidence-aligned reading instruction.

DD: What is reading fluency, and why is it one of the five components of reading?

CW: Fluency has three specific elements or parts that make up current definitions. It's helpful to review Jan Hasbrouck and Deborah Glaser's definition of fluency. Hasbrouck states that fluency is "reasonably accurate reading, at an

Curious Question: *Can you read this sentence written in Noah Webster's recommended American English spellings?*

**Enuf masheens! I trezur
tru, butiful, anteek shandeleers.**

appropriate rate, with suitable expression, that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read” (Hasbrouck & Glaser, Webinar, 2019).

When we consider fluency as one of the five components of reading, take a look at [Scarborough’s Reading Rope](#) (Scarboro, 2001). The strands that represent language comprehension are equally as important as the word recognition strands. These skills support and build on each other by weaving the desired outcome of a fluent reader with strong comprehension skills. Oral reading fluency is an outcome of all of those strands working efficiently. If we revisit Hasbrouck’s definition of fluency, we can replace the word **rate** with **automaticity**. Reading automatically moves us into the bottom strands of the rope. Students need to master sounds, segment them, blend these sounds into words, and eventually reading words by sight. Reading words by sight is not the same as memorizing words. Reading by sight means students have orthographically mapped the sounds that letters and letter combinations make, when blended together to create a word. Once a student has orthographically mapped these sounds, they can automatically read the words, because they have committed the sounds the letter combinations make to long-term memory.

Accuracy, which is part of the fluency definition, is extremely important for supporting reading comprehension. In her webinar “Reading Fast or Reading Well,” Hasbrouck (2025) states that accuracy comes first. Without accuracy, students

will lose the meaning of a written passage. Accuracy begins at an early stage of reading. Students need to be accurate with letter naming, letter sounds, and segmenting and blending of sounds into words. Accuracy includes high-frequency words as well. Accuracy is considered a very important element of reading fluently because it also supports reading comprehension. You can see why the three-cueing method that promoted guessing was damaging to our emerging readers. Guessing does not support reading words accurately and impairs comprehension of reading passages.

According to Hasbrouck, accuracy when instructing students should be 100%. When I am delivering a lesson on segmenting and blending of three-letter blends, for example, I progress monitor how well students can accurately and eventually automatically read words with three-letter blends. When students read these words with 100% accuracy in list form and in passage form I know they have mastered the concept.

Hasbrouck continues to say that when reading independently, the expected accuracy rate for independent older readers decreases from 98% to 95% accuracy. Emerging readers should be given independent text that they are able to read at an accuracy rate of 97% to 98%. Some reading programs have benchmarks for accurate and automatic reading of decodable words. Meeting those benchmarks before moving on to new concepts supports orthographic mapping, which is important for automaticity.



Reading a passage too quickly or reading too slowly can have the same effect on comprehension. Too slowly may be an indicator that a student needs direct instruction in word-level or decoding skills. The student is working very hard to decode words, creating a cognitive overload that takes away from understanding the meaning of the passage. But this is also true for reading too quickly. Reading too quickly does not allow our brains to take in the meaning of the words and sentences that we are reading. Stahl and Kuhn (2002) stated that fluent reading should sound like speech. Researchers agree that oral reading should be at the rate of speech because our brains are wired to take in information at that rate.

DD: *Katherine Garnett (2018) compared reading fluency to playing the piano. Both require clusters of subskills that must be smoothed to "operate in synchrony" (p. 467-8). Is this a fair metaphor?*

CW: That's a great metaphor to use. Like any new skill we are working at mastering, we need to practice. I don't look at fluency as a skill I can teach, but rather a skill my students need to practice. My younger students use decodable texts and word lists to practice reading accurately and automatically. Teaching new graphemes and the sounds they make is not a one-and-done lesson. Practicing reading and writing words made up of those graphemes is important in the process of orthographic mapping.

DD: *Does fluency include only connected text, such as a story or article, or might it also include decodable text, vocabulary lists, "sight" words, or dialogue?*

CW: My students practice fluency with all of the above. I start fluency instruction where a student is at. I wouldn't hand a third-grade reading passage to a student who is just beginning to understand closed [short-vowel] one-syllable words and is still working on segmenting and blending. I would practice words with the concepts that are being worked on – phrases, sentences, and short passages that support the graphemes. I am going to give them texts with decodable patterns. Through progress monitoring for accuracy and automaticity, I determine when a student is ready to move into more complex text, such as passages with multisyllabic words. I know we panic as teachers when we have older students who are not proficient in reading. For students who have already been determined to be below proficient, this process feels slow. I always say to my colleagues that slow and steady wins the race. If we push a student too quickly into complex text before they master controlled text or text that supports the word concepts being worked on, then we fail that student. Give your students time to practice and master each basic word skill needed to become proficient readers. This is why progress monitoring and benchmark scores are important to understand and use. I have students practice fluency with their high-frequency words, with their "sight" words, words that are decodable and can be read accurately and automatically. For my younger students (K-1), we work on fluency drills for reading letter names. It's so amazing to watch younger students move from letter identification and sound to segmenting and blending of words automatically. I don't give multisyllabic word passages until we're in Level 3

in Wilson, when multisyllabic words are taught, and we teach syllable division patterns. Wilson provides benchmarks for both accuracy and automaticity. Teachers shouldn't move out of a substep until the student has met the benchmarks that this program provides.

DD: *How does a student's fluency vary depending on the text read?*

CW: Text structure and purpose is important but should not be an excuse for why a student is reading below benchmark for reading fluency. Reading a nonfiction passage on the Chunnel, for example, should still get the accuracy and automaticity we are looking for. As adults who read well, we read recipes and medical documents at a different rate from a novel we can't seem to put down. Reading something that we are unfamiliar with impacts how fluently we read, yet it is not a reason for dysfluency.

If you're reading a text in which the student lacks background knowledge, then the student may be slower in reading that passage, just as we would be as adults. In addition, some text passages just don't seem to flow well. They are not that well written. When the writing doesn't flow, the reading doesn't flow. Students will change the words. They will insert or delete them to sound more grammatically accurate. Choose passages that are comfortable for your students. When it comes to instruction, we don't have to read every passage offered by a company such as Wilson, DIBELS, or Acadience. Bring in some background knowledge before a cold read (a passage read for the first time). When I taught at the high school level, I would sometimes find a YouTube video or photos to show what a passage was about. For example, we read a passage on sand surfing in the desert. We live in Vermont where we have no deserts, but we did know what surfing in water looked like. Before our cold read, we watched this very short video on sand surfing, and then did the cold read. It's remarkable to see the difference in oral reading when a student has a reference to use for that passage. Other times, I discuss the title of a passage and see how we can hook some prior knowledge onto what the passage is about.

DD: *I have seen students misread a word, such as a verb tense or gender, and then they will change subsequent words to match the grammar necessary to accommodate their mistake. All the changes are marked as incorrect, since these are in fact mistakes. The student should not be thinking something written in past tense is in the present, or that a person is a different gender.*

CW: Students should also be receiving instruction on the mechanics, grammar, and usage of our language. Parts of speech are very important for comprehension. Students need direct instruction in GUM [Grammar, Usage, Mechanics] as we used to call it. I have read articles about how explicit instruction in parts of speech leads to stronger comprehension for written passages, but that's another topic.

DD: *What is the relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension?*

CW: Dr. Hasbrouck cites a study completed in the early 2000s that correlated different methods of instruction with comprehension ability (Fuchs, et al. 2001).

Fluency is a way of assessing how well a student is understanding what they read. But that doesn't mean that a student below benchmark necessarily has poor comprehension skills. Fluency scores are not diagnostic. They are indicators of how well a student is reading at grade level. If a student is a dysfluent reader, they may be putting all their cognitive effort into reading or decoding the individual words and then are not able to put the effort needed into understanding the text. Fluency screenings are efficient and valid ways to quickly assess a student's risk level for reading success or failure. Once we have the fluency data, we must dig deeper to see exactly why a student is not reading fluently. Is it at the word level? Is it background knowledge and/or poor vocabulary skills? Is there a concern with processing speed or working memory? Fluency plays a significant role in identifying students who need more than Tier 1 instruction.

DD: Is the goal for every middle-school student to read at least 100 words per minute, as seen on progress-monitoring assessments?

CW: There are a few really interesting studies that have been completed recently, which I define as in the last five or six years. First, a study looked at the 2018 scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) with the purpose of correlating the performance between oral reading fluency and comprehension success (White et al, 2021). The researchers developed measures for oral reading fluency, Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM), placing students' WCPM scores in the Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic categories. I think as an educator, what's important is understanding that there is a measure of WCPM that we should be adhering to when screening, instructing, and progress monitoring students' oral reading fluency. The takeaway from that report is that there is a range of WCPM that we should strive for at each grade level. That range of WCPM is between the 50th and 90th percentiles on an unpracticed grade level-text with an oral-reading fluency screener. Those percentiles are optimal for reading comprehension. I stress that students need to be reading at least at the 50th percentile. I think it's being taught to them.

To go back to your question, optimal fluency rates are different depending on the grade level or age of a student. By the spring of the middle-school year, we want to see eighth-grade students reading at least 146 WCPM to reach the 50th percentile. But a fourth grader would be reading around 120 WCPM by the spring of the year to reach the 50th percentile. Through several decades of research, Hasbrouck and Tindall created [their own benchmarks](#), which were last updated in 2017.

DD: Garnett states that a focus on reading speed "can be harmful" (p. 473) and can even develop "a debilitating habit of not interacting with the text as they 'read'" (p. 474). Have you seen this in your teaching practice?

CW: We don't want students speed-reading. We don't want them reading as fast as they can.

They need to be reading appropriately. Remember Stahl and Kuhn (2002) stated that fluent reading should sound like speech. Just setting a timer and timing students is not what repeated reading practice looks like. Repeated reading is a very effective practice, along with instruction for accuracy and phrasing. If a student is dysfluent, work on the skills that are impeding fluency.

Decoding words accurately and automatically, and phrasing are areas that will need direct instruction. Make sure that high frequency words in the reading passage are also known automatically. Early on, I thought teaching phrasing wasn't necessary so I skipped it even though it was part of the program's intervention. I strayed from the fidelity of the program. I also wasn't seeing the gains I am always hoping for. One year I made a commitment to teach the program to fidelity. Every piece of the lesson was part of my instruction as intended. It did make a difference in student growth. And I especially noticed how working on phrasing of sentences improved passage phrasing and fluency. At first, I modeled how to scoop and phrase sentences. I did this until I felt the students were able to phrase sentences on their own. Students enjoy scooping sentences into phrases and they love reading the sentences back to me with inflection. Sometimes quite dramatically. And I most definitely saw improvement in reading sentences and passages fluently. This practice is important and whenever possible should be occurring at least once a day. Because I am now a part-time teacher, on the days I am not at school, the teacher's assistant will work on fluency with my students for 5-10 minutes a day. Just telling students to read as fast

as they can is not helpful and is not how repeated reading works. There is a process to it which should be followed if you expect to see growth.

There are many opportunities to get automaticity practice into a lesson. When progress monitoring, I time my students and note the words related to the concept currently addressed. And I time students when they write their sentences for dictation. That was their idea, not mine.

DD: What instructional, monitoring, and assessment strategies do you find effective to improve reading fluency and comprehension in a group setting?

CW: When I worked as a reading specialist at Mount Anthony, we used text passages for students to do a cold read of something new. Working on phrasing was key. Then, for the week, students would practice reading with a partner. Sometimes a teacher would partner with them. We did not pair high- and low-readers. Instead, we paired them by passages, homogeneously grouped. I emphasized repeated readings because these showed the most growth. In another district, where parents asked to be involved, I gave them the passage to practice with their students.

DD: How did you show students their growth?

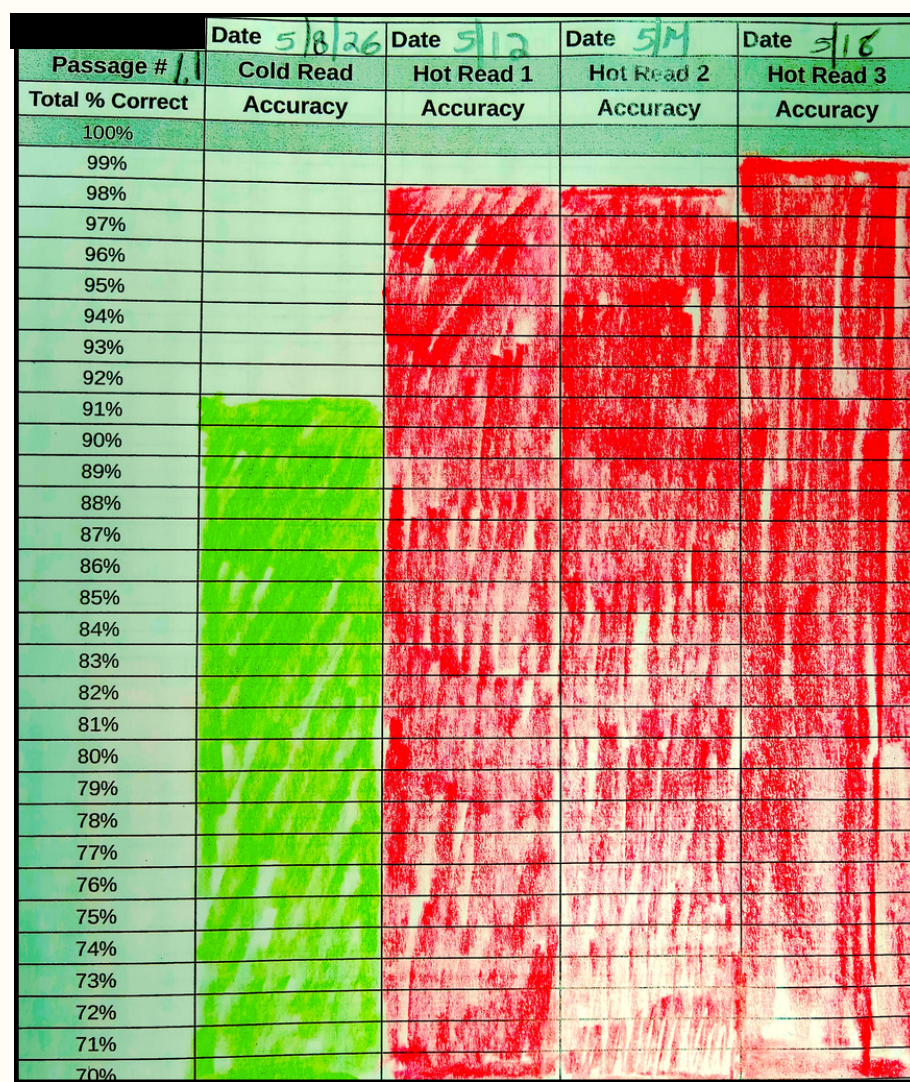
CW: We keep a fluency graph (see Figure 1). Here's how this works. The student is introduced to a story. I use the Read Naturally™ graph I was trained on twenty years ago. Read Naturally™ used the terms "cold read" and "hot read." The cold read is marked in blue, the first reading.



Hasbrouck recommends four hot reads, which are readings after the student has practiced. We may have as few as two hot reads. This can be up to the student. If the student hates the text in the cold read, we can choose a different passage. I mark what the student missed. Then I will go over the results with the student. We will practice it a few times. They'll read again, perhaps several times. In that case, I'll do the Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) score based on the best read on that day. The graph of scores shows each day of student progress.

For each read of the same passage, I mark on the same piece of paper to indicate the errors. For the first, cold reading, I place a check mark above the error with the date. If I'm doing a cold read with a student for progress monitoring, I make note of their mistake, and point it out afterwards, but I don't stop them from the reading fluency task. That way I can track the student's errors and corrections. For the second read, I place a slash through the word. The third time, the errors are circled. Then I can see all their errors in three reads on one page. I pull the passages from Acadience, DIBELS, and for a

Figure 1. Repeated Reading Progress Chart



young student I'm working with, the decodable Wilson texts. Wilson has a short book, Fluency, for Levels 1 through 3. This provides lists of decodables, high-frequency words, phrases, and the story. Acadience Reading has progress monitoring stories. I use these because they're done for me; the words are already counted out. I tell teachers, don't reinvent the wheel – use existing materials. The student's retell of the passage is very important. This also tells you how the student is understanding how our language is put together. Comprehension is equally important as reading fluency. Students do the retell during the cold read. Comprehension was a big focus in our high school structured-literacy class. We taught students comprehension strategies, visualization, questioning, prediction, and summarization.

Image courtesy of Dorinne Dorfman

TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

UNPACKING READING FLUENCY, VOL. 6, NO. 1

JUNE 8, 2026

DD: If you found a student struggling to comprehend during the cold read, what would you do?

CW: When practicing reading any passage or word list, it's important to remember that this is not a running record. However, if there are errors that the student makes, or words the teacher needs to insert for the student, then before repeating the reading, review and correct those errors with the student. If this is the first time students have been introduced to oral reading fluency practice, let them know that you are going to ask them to read the passage for one minute. Include in the explanation that if they come across a word they don't know, then you are going to read it to them, so they can continue without slowly sounding words out. As a student reads the passage or list of words, put a / through any words you had to insert, or any words where endings may have been left off. There are many, many passages available for free for teachers to use for each grade level. The words are counted out on the teacher copy so the teacher can quickly determine how many words correct per minute a student has read. When practicing for the repeated reading, or hot read, go over missed words before timing the passage. If there is an awkward or tricky part of the passage, then the teacher reads that section to the student. I would have the student read it one or two times through before timing again.

The next time you have a student read that passage, use a different mark for errors. For example, on a cold read, I write the date at the top of my paper with CR after it. I slash (/) any words I have to insert, or the student reads incorrectly.

That's it! The next time a student reads the passage, maybe the next day, I write the date and use a checkmark above the word(s) to record any errors. This is the first practiced read for this passage after getting data on the cold read. The third day, use an X above any words that need to be recorded as errors. The third hot read, I use a circle above any words that are mispronounced, missed, or inserted by the teacher. If I do four repeated readings, or hot reads, then I just circle the entire error.

It's recommended to do at least three hot reads. We graph each reading. Students enjoy graphing and also feel empowered when they see their hot reads improving. I have taught all ages and only a few times have I worked with a student who did not want to be timed. And that's OK, too. Measure their WCPM when you need the data. Over time, you will see that their cold reads do improve.

DD: *What is the effectiveness for improving reading fluency with more expressive or creative forms of reading aloud, such as readers' theater and poetry?*

CW: It's fun to deviate from the usual instruction and give students other opportunities for oral reading. I don't know the effect size for poetry or readers' theater. I like repeated readings because I can easily access the level of reading that I need, and as a progress monitoring tool, the number of words on a line have been counted for me.

As a classroom teacher I would bring in as many possible exposures as I can for students to read and listen to reading. Repeated readings have a purpose for practicing skills that are being taught and skills that have been mastered.

DD: What else would you like to share?

CW: I think that anytime you can put print on paper in front of a student that they are able to read, it's important to do so. We are in an age where students are not getting the amount of print in front of them that they should be. We all know that research is slowly catching up with the effect of technology on students and the developing brain. But we also need to support how classroom teachers can implement something like repeated readings into their already busy day. Students are more independent with the practice of reading stories. We need to recognize the balance we are looking for without jeopardizing the intended outcome of fluent readers who understand what they read, and want to read more.

Curious Question: What is Can you read this sentence written in Noah Webster's recommended American English spellings?

**Enuf masheens! I trezur
tru, butiful, anteek shandeleers.**

Answer:

**Enough machines! I treasure
true, beautiful, antique chandeliers.**

References

Acadience Learning. (2026). Acadience reading assessments.

<https://acadiencelearning.org/acadience-reading/>

Amplify. (n.d.). mCLASS®: K–6 literacy assessment & dyslexia screening. University of Oregon, Center on Teaching and Learning. (2020). 8th edition of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS®): Administration and scoring guide.

<https://amplify.com/programs/mclass/>

Fuchs, L. S., et al. (2001). Oral reading fluency as an indicator of reading competence: A theoretical, empirical, and historical analysis. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 5(3), 239-56.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ640702>

Garnett, K. (2017). Fluency in learning to read: Conceptions, misconceptions, learning disabilities, and instructional moves. In J. R. Birsh & S. Carreker (Eds.). *Multisensory teaching of basic language skills* (4th Ed.) (pp. 467-500). Brookes.

Hasbrouck, J. (2025). Reading fast or reading well? Webinar. The Stern Center for Language and Literacy.

Hasbrouck, J. & Glaser, D. A. (2019). *Reading fluency: Understand. Assess. Teach.* PD Essentials.

Hasbrouck, J. & Tindal, G. (2017). An update to compiled ORF norms (Technical Report No. 1702). Behavioral Research and Teaching, University of Oregon.

https://www.brtprojects.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/TechRpt_1702ORFNorms_Fini.pdf

Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Reports of the Subgroups. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/ch3.pdf>

Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for research in early literacy* (pp. 97-110). Guilford. <https://www.thereadingleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/TRL-C-Educators-and-Specialists-The-Reading-Rope-Key-Ideas-Behind-the-Metaphor.pdf>

Shanahan T. (2019). Wake up reading wars combatants: Fluency instruction is part of the science of reading. Reading Rockets.

<https://www.readingrockets.org/blogs/shanahan-on-literacy/wake-reading-wars-combatants-fluency-instruction-part-science-reading>

Stahl, S. A. & Kuhn, M. R. (2002). Making it sound like language: Developing fluency. *Reading Teacher*, 55(6), 582-584.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234662277_Making_It_Sound_Like_Language_Developing_Fluency

White, S. et al. (2021). The 2018 NAEP Oral Reading Fluency Study. U.S. Department of Education.

https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/studies/orf/2021025_orf_study.pdf

Wilson Language Training. *Wilson fluency/Basic*. <https://www.wilsonlanguage.com/programs/wilson-reading-system/wilson-fluency-basic/>

Meet the Writer and Editors

Arlington resident **Charlene Webster** has taught grades 3-6, special education, and structured literacy in southwestern Vermont over her 40-year career. In 2004, Charlene earned her M.S.Ed in Language and Literacy from Simmons College, a program grounded in the science of reading. With this knowledge, Charlene changed career paths and was hired as a literacy specialist at Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington. At MAUHS, she and two fellow graduates of Simmons College created a Literacy Lab to assess, diagnose, and provide intervention for struggling readers. Since retiring in 2020, Charlene now provides literacy consultation and advocacy, and continues to teach people of all ages to read.





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.

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*.

