

Student, Parent, and Teacher Voices

Mother Follows Daughter to Reading Recovery

Christine and Dianne Corcoran, and Peggy Fulcher, Hartland Consolidated School District, Michigan

“If you get someone to love reading, what is better than that?” says retired Reading Recovery teacher Peggy Fulcher. “Because if they have the love, they can master anything.”

As a first grader, Christine Corcoran knew she wanted to read but it was a struggle for her. Although her September 1995 scores were not low enough for her to qualify for the first-semester round of Reading Recovery, she entered first grade with some confusions. She was reading at Level 2, could recognize 46 of 54 letters, and her Concepts About Print score was 11 of 24 (Stanine 3). She could write a fair number of words, but she hadn’t been able to put all the pieces together in order to read.

“I remember that my favorite book was *Rainbow Fish*,” Christine said. “I loved the pictures and all the sparkles. My mom read it to me, but I always

wanted to be able to read it and understand it for myself.”

She was placed in a classroom reading group but did not progress. By the end of February 1996, she was reading at Level 5. She was still missing some letters (she had 51 out of 54), and had reached Stanine 6 in writing words.

When Christine met Mrs. Fulcher in the spring of 1996, her writing vocabulary was high—Stanine 7—but she was reading at Level 7, a low level for the spring of first grade. Things hadn’t yet fallen into place for her in reading.

“Christine was the perfect Reading Recovery student,” Peggy said. “She was a spring child, who came to me in the second round. It was my first year out of training. I discontinued lessons with nine children that year. It was a great year, a whirlwind.”

Peggy had just begun teaching Reading Recovery in the Hartland Consolidated School District in Hartland, Michigan, having completed her training year in 1994–95. At the time, classroom teachers knew if a student needed help, but there was no running record. So the Reading Recovery teacher had to watch carefully in the literacy group. She saw that Christine needed help, an opinion both the classroom teacher and Christine’s mother, Dianne, confirmed.

“Many kids enter school already reading or pretending to read,” Peggy said. “You often don’t know the difference unless you’re working with them one-to-one. I remember



When first grader Christine began her Reading Recovery lessons in the spring of 1996, she was reading at Level 7.

Christine in the literacy group because when we did choral reading, her eyes were up. I could see that she wasn’t looking at the print.”

For Dianne, an educator herself, Christine’s struggle with reading came as a surprise. “We read to her, took her to the library, she went to preschool, but she still had confusions. We thought we’d done everything right,” Dianne said. “I wasn’t familiar with Reading Recovery when it was offered to my daughter, but I knew she was struggling so I jumped at the chance.”

Christine enjoyed her Reading Recovery lessons. “Mrs. Fulcher took the time to explain everything to me more thoroughly and helped me get it through my head,” Christine said.

Christine’s mother and family were very supportive and dedicated to



Peggy Fulcher helped Christine and Dianne Corcoran discover the power of Reading Recovery.

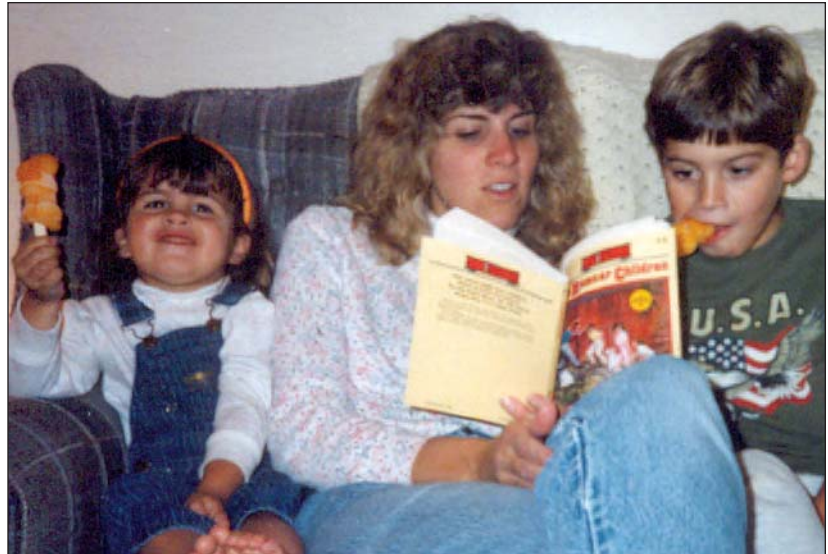
helping her learn. They practiced reading every night and made sure to send in a note excusing Christine from her lesson when they had a family event to attend.

In May 1996, Christine's lessons were discontinued. She had become confident—reading at Level 18 after less than 12 weeks of instruction. She was finally able to put it all together.

Those skills stuck with her even over the summer vacation. “In the fall, her teacher asked her to pick out a book and read from it,” Dianne remembers. “Christine chose one of the Child Craft books, which are very challenging. Then, when she read from it—she just blew them away!”

Peggy also remembers that moment. “At that elementary school, the teachers stayed with the students throughout first and second grades—it was a multi-grade situation. So at the beginning of second grade, the teacher had the kids read to her. She knew Christine had been in Reading Recovery, so she was concerned when Christine picked out a Child Craft Encyclopedia and brought it over to read. She was also nervous because after summer, kids usually experience a drop in their skills. But Christine just opened the book and started reading!”

Now Christine is a high school senior, busy balancing her role as the captain of the track team and her after-school waitressing job. She is planning for her future and has her sights set on the career of her dreams in fashion marketing and merchandising. “I’m going to go to OCC (a local community college) for a year, and then hopefully after that to Chicago for fashion merchandising,” Christine said. “I’d like to work as a buyer, buying clothes for stores.”



Christine's struggle with reading came as a surprise for her mom, Dianne (center), a teacher who often read with her children, Christine and Sean.

“Reading Recovery was the key,” Dianne said. “It fixed her. She didn’t need further support. She’s not an all-A student but she’s done debate, the school newspaper, and even written a paper on Dante’s *Inferno*. If she hadn’t had Reading Recovery, I don’t know if she’d be in the same position now.”

Dianne and Peggy: Lifelong Learners in Reading Recovery

Christine’s experience with Reading Recovery had an unexpected ripple effect. Her mother, Dianne, is now a Reading Recovery teacher and is Peggy Fulcher’s hand-picked successor at Village Elementary in the Hartland Consolidated School District.

“I was an elementary classroom teacher and I was working on my master’s,” Dianne said. “I knew what I wanted—reading. U of M had a master’s in reading program, so I began taking classes there.”

Dianne was so impressed by the results of her daughter’s Reading Recovery experience that she asked if she could visit Mrs. Fulcher’s classes.

She used her own personal time and watched all the Reading Recovery students and the literacy groups. Peggy made arrangements for the groups to come in when Dianne was able to be there.

“While I was getting my master’s, I tutored in a school that was very strict on phonics, and I found that approach worked for some and not others,” Dianne said. “So I kept taking more classes, looking for the way to teach reading that helped the most people.”

Dianne also taught at a very prestigious school for the gifted and was surprised to find some second graders with high IQs who couldn’t read.

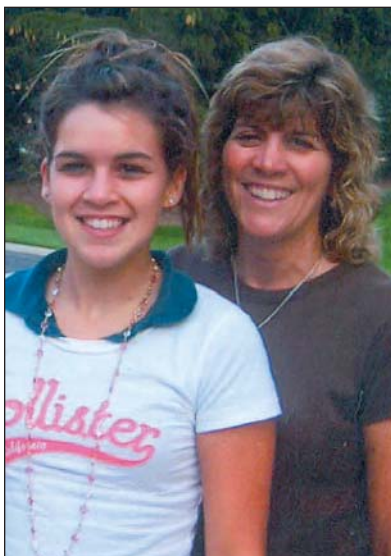
“No matter what economic background or IQ level, I discovered that about 20% of kids needed help,” Dianne said. “At the gifted school, they thought that the students would eventually pick up the skills they needed to read. Parents were spending money—a lot of money—and kids weren’t reading. So I said to myself, ‘there are kids coming here who can’t read!’ I watched Peggy do

her lessons, and I loved it for what it did for my daughter.”

Eventually, Dianne began teaching third grade in the Hartland School District and working with Peggy. “We had a lovely relationship,” Peggy said. “I told her she’d make a great Reading Recovery teacher.”

Peggy’s prediction came true sooner than either of them expected after Peggy decided to retire at the end of the 2006 school year.

“Dianne was always interested in Reading Recovery, and I always thought I’d be teaching until I was ninety,” Peggy recounted. “But everyone knows when it’s time. And Dianne was the first person I thought of. During my final school year I had conversations with Dianne about Reading Recovery. Then I finally said to her, ‘I’m thinking of retiring.’ I knew she was happy teaching third grade, but I said, ‘you’re perfect for this job. You know the staff, the building, you’ve worked with me, and your daughter was a success. You’d be perfect.’”



Christine (left) and Dianne Corcoran value their experiences with Reading Recovery — as student and as teacher.

After considerable thought, Dianne decided to make the change from the classroom to Reading Recovery. Because she was already in the school system, she saved the district the expense of an external search—which meant the district was able to offer her a scholarship for her Reading Recovery training.

“Teaching reading is an awesome responsibility,” Dianne said. “And I’ve got big shoes to fill. I’m in Peggy’s room now. It’s funny, when I took over from Peggy she left me notes all over.”

Dianne’s long search for the best reading program to help young readers brought her to some conclusions. “Now I believe that Reading Recovery, if it’s fully implemented, is the best way. If you can prevent the problems, you’re much better off. I’ve seen some kids in third grade struggle, and if they’re struggling in third grade, you know they’re in for a long road.”

Furthermore, Dianne’s experiences on her district’s K–12 curriculum committee have given her a certain perspective on the economics of Reading Recovery.

“Reading Recovery is cheaper in the long run,” she says. “It’s cost effective, because it’s prevention. I mean, it’s easier to not have a heart attack than to get healthy again after you’ve had one.”

Peggy agrees. “Reading Recovery is intervention. It lets you get to students before bad behaviors develop. With Title I you have to repair, you have to go back and undo. By the time kids get to second and third grade, what you’re doing is remediating—they’ve already developed bad behaviors.”



Christine plans to pursue her dream job in fashion merchandising.

Peggy’s retirement also brought a last-minute surprise when she was chosen Teacher of the Year at Hartland. “This is the first time they ever picked a Reading Recovery teacher, so it’s quite a coup for Reading Recovery,” Peggy said. “Most of the time the person chosen is a classroom teacher.”

Peggy finds it hard to believe she spent 28 years at Hartland Schools. “Time went by so quickly,” she said. “Now I’ve been asked to teach at Baker College—to teach reading to secondary students. So this is not retirement!”

As Peggy’s successor, Dianne will carry on the work of helping students who struggle. It is a task she is well-qualified to do, according to one close observer.

“When I found out mom got the job as Reading Recovery teacher, I was so excited for her,” said Dianne’s daughter, Christine. “I know how much Reading Recovery can change a child’s life. And my mom has always had a knack for helping kids.”