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Success with Struggling Readers: The Benchmark School Approach, Irene West Gaskins
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CHAPTER 1

Searching for Answers to the Why and How of Struggling Readers

In this book I take the reader with me on a 45-year odyssey in search of answers to two questions:

1. Why do some bright students fail to learn to read, despite receiving the same instruction, from the same teachers, in the same classrooms in which their classmates succeed?
2. What, if anything, works when teaching struggling readers to read?

The answer to the first question, I suspect, has to do with the fact that no two people are alike—that it is our differences that define who we are. In this book we explore those differences and their implications for instruction. One implication I suggest is that as long as educators believe they have discovered *the* one best approach for teaching all students, it is a certainty that the instructional match will be a poor one for some students. When this is the case, students will struggle and fail. When educators understand differences among learners and adjust instruction accordingly, students succeed.

The abbreviated answer to "What works?" is: a caring teacher who knows a lot about current research and theory in education and psychology and, as a result, is an expert at such tasks as managing a classroom, teaching students explicitly how to accomplish school tasks, and scaffolding instruction to support students where they are. In this book I elaborate on what the Benchmark School staff and I have discovered about what works as well as why students fail to learn to read and how this failure can be turned into success. As a backdrop for answering my opening questions, in this chapter I provide background information about my personal experiences in teaching struggling readers and how these experiences led to the founding of Benchmark School. I also introduce Benchmark's students, staff, parents, and programs.

HISTORY

Teaching and Learning to Teach

An overriding concern I had during the 1960s was the tendency of educators and psychologists to look for the reason for poor reading within the child. The rationale seemed to be, if everyone else in the class, except Johnny, is learning to read as a result of what is happening in the class, then there must be something wrong with Johnny. Rarely was the instructional approach questioned. My hypothesis, however, was that perhaps most students were learning *in spite of* teachers or programs. Looking back on the first elementary school reading class I taught, I certainly suspect that was the case. I now believe that the successful students in my class either adjusted their way of learning to match the way I taught, or they figured out how to read on their own. If I am right, the very students who were unable to adjust to the way I taught and who needed instruction tailored to the way they learned were the ones who did not get taught. Certainly the easy-to-teach students were in the majority in suburban schools, and many teachers like myself may have deluded themselves into thinking they were teaching. In actuality, the very students who needed teaching may not have been taught, because they needed something different from what I knew how to present. As I continued to work with struggling readers, I also continued to wonder if the reason some students struggled in learning to read might lie in how we taught them, and I pondered whether all children might succeed in learning to read in the early grades if we changed our instruction to meet each child where he or she was at in the reading process.

As a result of these wonderings, two activities occupied much of my time during the 1960s: one was trying to teach all my students to read, and the other was attending graduate school to acquire the knowledge of research and theory that would help me reach that goal. The two questions above (Why do some students fail? What works?) provided the purpose and focus for my ongoing knowledge quest.

It was exciting to be a student, and later a research assistant, at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s. Penn had received one of the First Grade Reading Studies grants, and I loved being in on the comments Wesley Schnyer, Penn's principal investigator, made after his visits to the Philadelphia classrooms that were using one of the two reading methods he was comparing. The methods being compared in the Penn study were a traditional basal reader approach and a linguistic approach. Charles Fries, the author of the linguistic approach the Philadelphia schools were using, was at Penn at the time and one of my professors. One of his instructional axioms was that beginning readers' texts should contain no pictures because students need to focus on the minimal differences in words, rather than rely on pictures for clues. The texts for the linguistic program contained few high-frequency words (e.g., *the*, *are*) unless the high-frequency words contained a common spelling pattern (e.g., *in*, *at*). This alone, I thought, made for some pretty bland and awkward reading, made even less appealing by a lack of illustrations. However, much to my surprise, not all struggling readers agreed with me.

As part of a two-semester clinical course, Penn's reading majors tutored struggling readers using Fries's approach, among other approaches (e.g., Fernald, basal, synthetic phonics, language experience). I can remember thinking, "How will I ever motivate students to become excited about a character named Dan, who is asked to fan the man

in the tan van?" However, unexpectedly for me, a few of my students thrived using this approach, apparently as a result of the comfort they derived from being able to decode all of the words in the text, due to the words' consistent rhyming structure. Some students actually deemed the linguistic approach as the method that helped them the most. This estimation, however, was not expressed by most of my students, some of whom seemed not to notice the minimal visual differences between words such as *man* and *men* or *let* and *lit.* I was learning that different approaches work for different students, and that student differences affect success in learning to read. Researchers at the 27 universities that conducted First Grade Reading Studies concluded that no one method was significantly superior to the others. It appeared that it was the teacher who made the difference, not the method or materials (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). I was delighted. This huge study confirmed what I suspected—it is how knowledgeable a teacher is in meeting students where they are that really counts.

During the 10 years in which I was completing graduate work, I also gained experience teaching struggling readers in public and private schools, as well as in a growing private practice in my home. In 1968, in addition to teaching in my private practice, I began teaching several reading methods courses at Penn. By that time I had grown dissatisfied with the instructional options and prognosis for struggling readers prevalent in the 1960s. With few exceptions, the programs then in place did not produce students who eventually returned to regular classes and functioned academically on a level commensurate with their abilities, or even on a level equal to average students in their grade placement. As we entered the 1970s, it was clear to many parents, and to me, that the programs for remediating reading problems and preparing poor readers for successful school experiences were not working. There had to be a better way. That better way, I knew, would be based on the realization that there is not one best way to teach children to read, to learn, or to think. Instead, instruction needed to be grounded in research-based principles of instruction, one principle being that *children learn differently*. I found myself sharing theories with my Penn students about reading instruction that were based on findings I had gleaned from the research but not actually tried in a classroom. I longed for a school where I could try out my theories about research-based instruction for struggling readers.

Founding a School

I did not have to wait long for that school. In 1970 several events conspired to force me to step out on faith and make my dream for a school a reality. One event was that the church to which my husband and I belonged had just finished a beautiful new educational building, and our pastor, George Eppehimer, asked if I would like to start a school there. That opportunity got me thinking seriously about starting a school. The deciding event was a visit from the manager of the township in which our home was located. He knocked on my door in the spring of 1970 and informed me that my neighbors had complained about my running a school in my home, something not allowed in our Pennsylvania township. Their evidence was the two to four cars that were frequently parked in front of our house. I countered that I was not running a school. I only tutored students, some individually and some in small groups. He asked how many students I worked with each week. I mentally counted my students and surprised even

myself when I discovered that I was teaching 42 students a week. The township manager said that 42 students constituted a school. He suggested I find another location for my school.

Seventeen of those 42 students formed the nucleus for what was to become Benchmark School. Benchmark began as a half-day, released-time school, with students returning in the afternoon to their neighborhood schools. Before long those of us teaching at the school realized that struggling readers need support throughout the school day in all of their courses. By 1973 Benchmark was able to offer both a half-day and a full-day program. Both options included a daily 2½-hour reading block that featured a great deal of reading and responding to what was read (Gaskins, 1980). The half-day program was phased out during the early years of the school because it separated the teaching of reading from the rest of the curriculum. Now all children who attend Benchmark School receive a full elementary and middle school curriculum. We have grown from a school of 17 students to our present enrollment of 204. Currently, the student body consists of 130 lower school students and 74 middle school students.

As it began, Benchmark remains an independent school for children who read below grade level, have average or above-average intelligence, and whose reading delay cannot be attributed to primary emotional or obvious neurological problems. Many of our students enter the school as nonreaders, with the remaining students entering the school reading below fourth-grade reader level. Our goal as we began the school was to guide poor readers in grades 1–8 to read on a par with their potential. Those who worked with me agreed that children learn differently, and that a one-program-fits-all approach to teaching would not be appropriate for, or fair to, our students. We believed that students who had not experienced success in learning to read had been victims of instruction that did not match the way they learned. As a result, Benchmark's teachers had to know how to teach using many different approaches or methods and to adjust these, as well as the skills and strategies they taught, to the needs of individual students.

Although Benchmark began as a school whose major focus was teaching reading to struggling readers, the school's interest from the start was the total child. We wanted each student to experience success and, as a result, develop a sense of self-worth and self-confidence that we knew were prerequisites for their being willing to take the risks that are necessary for further academic success. Our goal was not only to provide each student we accepted with a successful academic experience during the student's stay at Benchmark, but also to equip him or her with the heuristics (informal methods for learning independently), strategies, and skills needed to cope with the demands of the educational settings students would encounter after Benchmark.

Our early years were exhilarating; we could see that we were achieving these goals, despite many obstacles. For one thing, as a new, unknown school we had to accept students on whom others had given up, often students whose difficult behavior appeared more prominent than their reading difficulties. Yet Benchmark teachers were able to love those students who rejected their love, to see positive attributes in each student, and to persist in finding a way to reach each one. The staff planned extensively, worked as a team, and studied hard to grow professionally. Their rewards came in the form of each tiny step forward, each sign of interest, each acknowledgment that learning to read was possible, and, most of all, each student we caught mesmerized by a book.

Growing a School

The Physical Plant

Benchmark opened its doors as an incorporated, independent school in the fall of 1970. We began classes in a damp church basement not far from the Wallingford train station rather than in the country church's new educational building, as originally planned (but that is a story for another day). As a result of an influx of state-funded students, we grew quickly, necessitating the rental of additional space from the Wallingford–Swarthmore School District. We even dared to think about building our own building.

In the spring of 1974, a 10-year-old Benchmark applicant led me to an idyllic piece of land for a school: 68 mostly wooded acres in the middle of the hubbub of suburban Delaware County. The goal was to scrape up the money for 7 acres and hope that, over time, we could acquire more acres. Lyman Perry, a newly minted architect and husband of a Benchmark teacher, was drafted to design the building—and what a design it was! Ten classrooms opened into a large library with a cathedral ceiling and skylight. A mezzanine surrounded the library, looking down on the library and classrooms. My office and those of other administrators would be situated on the mezzanine. The design was simple, functional, and breathtaking. Builders bid on constructing it and came in with bids well beyond the mortgage any bank would give us. One builder agreed to build as much of the building as we could afford, and walk away from the building when we reached that amount. And that is exactly what happened.

Building community is particularly important for struggling readers who participate in programs that draw students from many locales. In this picture students and staff enjoy an assembly in the Carrington Commons.

In August 1975 we called the 128 parents of Benchmark students and asked them to volunteer to help us finish the building, so that we could

begin school in the building the day after Labor Day. Each family was given a specific responsibility and worked at the school with my husband, boys, and me every night and weekend until the building was fit for occupancy. That was another amazing story! School began, as scheduled, in the new building.

In 1978 we added a second building, a gymnasium designed in the same contemporary style as the classroom building. The enrollment of the school continued to grow, and we added four classrooms and a large science room in the basement of the original classroom building. Next, in 1982, we built the Perot Wing, which added four classrooms, six offices for psychologists and counselors, an art room, and a conference room, followed in 1992 by the addition of the three-story Preston Wing, containing a curriculum library on the top floor, 12 offices and a science room on the middle floor, and an auditorium and kitchenette on the bottom floor—1992 was the year that I swore I would never build another building, but I had to eat my words.

In the fall of 2002 the middle school moved into a spacious, new, two-story wing, the Dorrance Hill Hamilton Wing, with six classrooms and a huge commons area on one floor and, above it, two office suites totaling 14 offices, plus a second and larger conference room to better accommodate our ever-growing staff. Probably the most remarkable building feat at Benchmark is our A. Palmer West Performing Arts Center, which opened just in time to host a series of lectures by Howard Gardner in March of 2003. The architecture is, again, breathtaking. Its most noticeable feature is the mammoth glass window located behind the stage that runs the full length and height of the stage and allows guests to view the heavily wooded setting of the school.

Along with the construction of new buildings, we have also renovated older building spaces. As just one example, the 10 lower school classrooms were most recently renovated by adding 12 additional feet to each classroom, primarily to accommodate the increased staff in each classroom as well as the addition of many computers.

The grounds, too, have increased. We now have 23 acres of woods, buildings, playgrounds, challenge courses, and playing fields. Unfortunately, the remainder of the original 68 wooded acres located on the shore of a beautiful reservoir was snapped up by developers before we could acquire it.

The Students

Since the founding of Benchmark, our students have had two things in common: They struggle in reading and/or writing, and they have average or above-average ability. Although in our early years most of our students were state funded, this has not been the case since the early 1980s. During the most recent years, Benchmark students have tended to be predominantly white, middle-class students with an average Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-III or -IV) Full Scale IQ of 110–115. A few students each year are African American and Asian American, as well as children of recent immigrants to the United States. Most of our students are privately funded with about 10% receiving tuition assistance and 3% receiving state funds. During school year 2004–2005, 204 students arrived at the school each day from as far away as New Jersey and Delaware, as well as Philadelphia and areas north of Philadelphia. Others live on the main line in the townships of Delaware County, Montgomery County, and Chester County

Most students have higher Verbal intelligence scores than Performance scores and tend to have low Information, Arithmetic, Digit Span, and Coding scores as compared to their other subtest scores on the WISC-III. This pattern may change as more children are evaluated using the WISC-IV.

Most students enter Benchmark when they are between 7 and 10 years of age, and most enter as virtual nonreaders. Most students remain at the school through the age of 14, although no new students are accepted who are older than 11 years, 11 months. All students who enter the school are performing below expectation for their age in reading and writing, with most exhibiting poor decoding and spelling skills. A few of the characteristics most often mentioned in reference to entering Benchmark students are inattentive, disorganized, passive, impulsive, rigid, not persistent, intellectually curious, verbal, and charming.

During recent years students' average length of stay has been 6 years, after which most enter a full-time regular school setting, reading at or above the mean percentile in reading of the receiving school's student body. Our placement and follow-up department tracks the progress of our graduates for at least 5 years after they leave Benchmark. Our data suggest that almost 100% of our former students attend college and most graduate from college, with a surprising number going on to graduate school to complete, for example, law degrees or PhDs.

The Staff

The original staff of Benchmark School joined me because of the prospect of an exciting project and belief in the school's mission. For the most part the staff included parents of students in my tutoring practice, graduate and undergraduate students whom I taught at the University of Pennsylvania, and friends from church. The teachers all had master's degrees in reading and, like me, enjoyed professional growth and challenging students. Staff members' interest in professional growth, which has continued to the present day, is one of the secrets behind our success with struggling readers. We never believe that we have "arrived." We know there is always more to learn, so that we can better meet the needs of our students.

The school began with three dedicated teachers who were graduates of Penn's reading program. Kate Perry worked with the youngest students, Barbara Grove taught the middle group, and I taught the oldest students. In the next 10 years we added more outstanding graduates from Penn's reading program. They proved, time and again, that a school is as good as its teachers. They were what made the school great. Among those teachers from Penn were Thorne Elliot, Norma Notzold, Barbara Barus, Janet Rogers, Sally Ross Laird, Suzie Perot, Penny Moldofsky, Michelle Hoffman, Rebecca Hemphill, Judy Beck, Caroline Curtis, Emily Moorhead, Valerie Maerker, Ellen Reider, Nancy Stevens Powell, and Mary Beth Casey Humbert. All brought to their teaching rich theoretical and research knowledge about teaching reading, and during their time at the school, that knowledge continued to grow. Many have now moved on to positions of leadership in other schools, taking a bit of Benchmark with them. I am very proud of what they have accomplished. In addition to recruiting my Penn students, I found fabulous teachers at such unexpected places as the Little League field where my boys played baseball (Marj Downer and Nancy Brown).

A multidimensional approach recognizes that students learn differently and will need instruction matched to the approach and level that works best for each of them.

Most head teachers began at the school as student interns or aides. It has been our practice since the beginning of the school for each teacher to have an assistant, either an aide or a co-teacher. In more recent years the aides have been called *support teachers*. Support teachers are college graduates, sometimes with a master's degree, who are exploring the possibility of becoming teachers at Benchmark. During the recent past, each of our 10 lower school head teachers has had two assistants. Sometimes both are support teachers, and in other classrooms the teacher's assistants may be a support teacher and a co-teacher. In the middle school, some classes have two assistants, others have one. We view these assistant positions as a way of training staff to become head teachers.

The current staff of 90 includes 17 head teachers, 30 co-teachers and support teachers, 5 mathematics teachers, 5 special subjects teachers, 7 support services staff (psychologists, counselors, social workers), 1 reading tutor, 2 librarians, 7 academic coaches/supervisors, 4 development personnel, 2 bookkeeping, 4 front office, 1 Word Detectives sales, 1 drama club coach, 1 speech and language therapist, 1 information technology coordinator, 1 building and grounds maintenance employee, and the director of the school—the role I fill.

The Parents

Benchmark's parents come from all walks of life. In the majority of cases, both parents work outside the home. Since the founding of the school, parents of Benchmark students have signed a contract that commits them to supporting their child's program at

the school by supervising 2 hours of homework each evening, as well as taking part in parent conferences, educational parent evenings, and volunteer activities. Most of our parents are actively involved in these endeavors and run many volunteer projects at the school. For example, to mention only a few of the volunteer projects, the Benchmark Parent Association (BPA) provides daily assistance in shelving books in the library, runs a pizza and milk program for students, provides children's programs, collects bonus coupons, sponsors a 3-day book fair, tape-records books, plans social functions, and raises money for special projects.

Homework checklists, with space for notes to and from parents, are sent home nightly by the teachers of the younger students, and assignment books are used with older students. Parents of students in the younger classes at Benchmark are asked to read to their child for 20–30 minutes each evening in a read-aloud book provided by the school that is at their child's intellectual and interest level. In addition, parents agree to supervise their child's 30 minutes of reading in a text at his or her instructional level. At the lowest reading levels, parents listen to their child read to them, or they may choral or echo read with their child. At higher reading levels, parents help children schedule a regular time for homework and arrange for a quiet place for their child to work independently. Parents are asked to check to see that their child has satisfactorily completed the written response to reading that accompanies nightly reading. Parents also may be asked to work with children on math flash cards or to check math computation. Additionally, parents are expected to take an interest in social studies, science, and health projects and support these in any way they can. For children at the beginning stages of reading, meetings are held to train parents in how to support the Word Detectives decoding program taught at Benchmark (Gaskins, 1998).

Communication between teachers and parents is frequent. The homework checklist is a daily means of communication and phone calls to and from home are commonplace on an almost weekly basis. In addition, communication by e-mail is becoming popular. Parent conferences are held each trimester, as well as additionally as requested. Teachers of the younger students usually send home a monthly newsletter that reports events of the past month and previews what will be studied in the coming month. Each Wednesday the school sends home what has become known as "the Wednesday announcements" to keep parents aware of events happening at the school. The Benchmark staff takes communication with parents very seriously.

THE SCHOOL'S ORGANIZATION, PROGRAM'S, AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Organization of the School

For the past 15 years the school has been organized into a lower school and a middle school. The lower school is composed of students in grades 1–6, although grade levels are not used to determine placement at Benchmark; instead students are grouped based on their reading levels and ages. Classes are composed of between 11 and 13 students who are reading at two or three contiguous reading levels (e.g., 2-2, 3-1, 3-2). Students in each class would be those generally thought of as first/second graders, second/third graders, etc.

Lower School

Lower school students receive literacy instruction from 8:15 until 11:00 each day. At 11:00 students begin their afternoon schedule, which includes 40-minute periods: lunch and recess (daily), math (daily), science (two or three times weekly), social studies (three or four times weekly), physical education (two times weekly), music (one time weekly), art (one time weekly), health (one time weekly), handwriting (two times weekly), and class meeting (one time weekly). A read-aloud period is also worked into each day's afternoon schedule. The head teacher teaches the literacy block and social studies and oversees the lunch/recess block. Generally, special teachers and support services are in charge of the remaining blocks. In the youngest class the head teacher also teaches science, as well as writing in the afternoon. Thus, the youngest students receive one period a day more of literacy instruction than students in the other lower school classes.

Middle School

Middle school students are designated as first-year, second-year, and third-year students. The first-year classes are composed mostly of seventh graders, with a few sixth graders. Second years are mostly eighth graders, and third years are students who have not yet turned 15 and who choose to remain for an extra year to better prepare for entry the following year into a traditional high school.

Middle school students change classes every 40 minutes, except for the 80-minute literacy period prior to lunch. Middle school students all have 40 minutes of science and 40 minutes of social studies each morning, followed by a 30-minute mentor period before the 80-minute literacy block. Next, there is a 40-minute period for lunch and socializing, followed by 40 minutes of more literacy instruction. The final two periods of the day are devoted to math and special subjects.

Support Services

The seven professionals in this department, composed of psychologists, counselors, and social workers, are assigned as consultants to lower school classrooms; they have a caseload of approximately two classes. Their job is to get to know the students, parents, and teachers associated with their classes and to provide any services that will support the children in the classes to which they are assigned. For example, these professionals facilitate weekly class meetings, mediate discipline problems, run small groups, provide parent programs, see students individually, organize case conferences, and collaborate with teachers in planning for each student. Each support services member is an integral part of several classroom teams.

Curriculum and Instruction

Much of Benchmark's curriculum and instruction is homegrown; it is based on research, theory, and what works with Benchmark students. How we teach and what we teach are continually evolving as we study the professional literature and gather

data about the progress of our students. This book tells the story of curriculum and instruction at Benchmark, and I leave it to the reader to seek out information in the following chapters that is relevant to his or her students.

Special Programs

In addition to teaching the traditional elementary and middle school curriculum in a not-so-traditional way, Benchmark offers many extras for its students. Some lower school students participate in a taped-repeated-reading program, and some middle school students use taped books to support the voluminous reading done in the middle school. For our youngest readers we have a books-in-bags program, in which children take home a bag of three to five "little books" for the week, then are "checked out" by our reading tutor, usually referred to as the books-in-bags lady. Other special programs are readers' theater, drama club, and after-school guided study. One of our most exciting events is the production of a Broadway musical each year by the middle school, including making sets and running the technology booth. In addition, after-school activities include an outstanding soccer program, a ropes course challenge club, girls' club, chess club, basketball, golf, chorus club, and much more.

Professional Development

For 35 years long-term, in-depth professional development has been the foundation upon which Benchmark teachers have built a top-notch program. Professional development is a way of life at Benchmark. The school is characterized by staff inquiry, collaboration, and continuous improvement. It is a learning organization. The staff believes that, if the goal of schooling is knowing how to learn and understand, then it follows that teacher training should be grounded in the knowledge of how students learn and understand. Our inservice programs, retreats, seminars, and workshops throughout the year explore the what, why, and how of classroom presentations—presentations that are tailored to the characteristics of learners and emphasize major concepts and principles, together with strategies for learning and understanding.

To achieve satisfactory progress, struggling readers not only need to experience high-quality, explicit instruction and maximum time on task, but they also need to be in an environment that supports their social needs.

Events that facilitate professional development are monthly inservice meetings, often led by a well-known educator or psychologist and sometimes led by our own inhouse experts; weekly research seminars co-led by the director and research associate; weekly meetings with academic coaches/supervisors; and team and department-level meetings. An interactive journal, passed between a teacher and academic coach as they observe each other teach, is a great facilitator of professional growth. Professional development is augmented by a large professional library of up-to-date books and professional journals, which are kept in circulation by the school's librarian. In addition, there is always at least one research project and one curriculum development project being carried out at Benchmark. For example, currently Eric Satlow, our research associate, Linnea Ehri, our word-identification consultant, and I are analyzing 8 years of Benchmark word-identification data, whereas others are conducting an ethnographic study with Michael Pressley about the workings of Benchmark School. With respect to curriculum development the staff has developed programs for process writing, word identification, and strategies across the curriculum. In addition, the staff has collaborated to develop conceptually based instruction in mathematics, social studies, and science. Without a strong emphasis on professional development, Benchmark would not be able to present a schoolwide, coordinated program that allows our students a chance to be the best they can be.

OVERVIEW OF WHAT IS TO COME

The remainder of this book attempts to answer, in depth, the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter:

1. Why do some bright students fail to learn to read, despite receiving the same instruction, from the same teachers, in the same classrooms in which their classmates succeed?
2. What, if anything, works when teaching struggling readers to read?

Benchmark's Interactive Learning Model is discussed in Chapters 2–6 as a way of examining the variables that the Benchmark staff believes interact to determine the ease with which children learn to read. Chapters 3 and 4 explore characteristics of struggling readers and how we help students cope with characteristics that may prove to be roadblocks to learning. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with situation, task, and text variables that influence learning to read and with which students and teachers need to be aware.

Chapters 7–9 introduce the learning principles that guide instruction in Benchmark classrooms, whereas Chapters 10–13 illustrate how the Benchmark staff applies these principles to teach students procedural knowledge, including how to decode and complete other school tasks such as comprehending text and organizing long-term projects. Chapter 14 describes how we teach declarative knowledge by emphasizing concepts, essential understandings, and knowledge structures. The final chapter, Chapter 15, is a summary of some of the insights I have gained from 45 years of teaching struggling readers.

A library at the center of the school is a daily reminder that reading many books at an appropriate level is the key to success as a reader.

At Benchmark we have discovered that struggling readers not only can be taught to read, but they can be taught to succeed well in schools that place a high premium on learning, thinking, and problem solving. We believe this goal is achieved because Benchmark teachers understand individual students and apply student-centered, research-based principles. To achieve this accomplishment requires a great deal of knowledge. The goal of this book is to share some of the knowledge that the Benchmark staff has acquired over many years.

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