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## Peer Modeling and Motivating to Increase Fluency

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**Peer Modeling and Motivating to Increase Fluency**

Sara E. Halferty

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

### **Abstract**

This paper describes a fluency intervention plan for an at-risk group of third graders in Newton, Iowa. The components of a good fluency intervention include repeated reading, motivation, peer involvement, and small group size. Utilizing research on these topics, the author created a fluency intervention to implement within a thirty-minute time period each day. This paper provides a timeline of specific changes that will be made to improve fluency scores for these students.

*Keywords:* Fluency, comprehension, intervention

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### **Peer Modeling and Motivating to Increase Fluency: A School Improvement Plan**

By third grade, we want students to read quickly, but we also need them to understand what they are reading. The problem is that until students can get past sounding out words and using a lot of mental effort on saying words correctly, they do not have the capacity to think about what the words mean. This is why automaticity is a key component in developing reading fluency (Coker, 2022). There are many words that students need to have in their “mental dictionary” to be able to quickly recognize them when reading (Coker, 2022). The problem is that students in the third grade at Emerson Hough Elementary School are disproportionately below fluency benchmark scores compared to other grade levels. These students are stuck on sounding out words instead of having automaticity, and it slows them down. Because they are struggling to decode words and read very slowly, they are unable to comprehend grade level texts. If these students do not improve their reading fluency and master comprehension skills by the end of elementary school, they have an increased risk of dropping out of school and struggling to work in today’s society (Rinaldi et al., 1997).

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to introduce new fluency interventions and respond to the data produced from reading interventions, thereby improving students’ results on FastBridge CBM-R progress monitoring. The interventions that will be introduced, reading racetrack and repeated reading with comprehension, will hopefully increase sight word automaticity, reading speed, and motivation to read. During these interventions, there will be a considerable amount of peer coaching and praise, coupled with rewards for beating goals. It is the author’s goal that this school improvement project will help students at Emerson Hough Elementary School and similar students at other schools become more fluent readers and have more motivation to read.

Research for this project's literature review was conducted using research journals available through the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. The author focused on articles about fluency interventions, specifically for students in elementary school. The author researched studies about the best length of time and group size for interventions, peer coaching, and motivational aspects of fluency interventions to find what was most successful. This scope of research allowed the author find interventions that would be highly effective for the third graders at Emerson Hough.

The belief is students in third grade at Emerson Hough Elementary will reach 80% grade level proficiency based on FastBridge CBM-R progress monitoring by using rigorous interventions focusing on sight words and fluent reading with comprehension. The interventions will be done consecutively for 15 minutes each every day within a 30-minute time chunk. Both types of interventions will be peer coaching exercises. Peer coaching exercises where the students help each other by in working pairs can free up teachers to praise and help more students while providing everyone with intensive practice time (Coker, 2022). During the first intervention, students will practice sight words with peers by using the reading racetrack game. This game is focused on the memorization of sight words for more instant recognition when reading fluency passages. During the game, the partner who is the lower reader attempts to "race" around the track by quickly reading sight words. Any words that are missed will be modeled by the higher-level reader and practiced again. Students are trying to beat goals based on the previous number of words read per minute. If they are working well and beating their goals, they will be praised and rewarded with tangibles such as stickers and stamps. Reading racetrack has been found to be highly effective in several studies, with one stating that it not only increased fluency, but eliminated almost all word errors (Rinaldi, et al., 1997).

Then for the next intervention, students will be paired up for repeated reading with comprehension. Repeated reading is the most common and most effective method to enhance the reading fluency in struggling learners, because consistent practice with the same words helps students grow their mental word bank (Coker, 2022). This intervention will benefit both the lower-level reader and the higher-level reader in the partner pairs, because they will both read the passages and work on building comprehension skills. Partners will take turns reading the story, working on any unknown words, retelling it to their partner using specific details, and then doing a timed reading. Students will be rewarded again if they beat their goals. Goal setting and motivational techniques are a key part of any repeated reading intervention, because if students are not motivated to read, they will be unwilling to participate fully in the intervention (Coker, 2022). Combining these interventions each day should lead to students who identify words faster, read with increased prosody and speed, and are motivated to read.

The literature review will review the factors the author considered when selecting an effective fluency intervention for third graders. First, literature review will cover the aspects of highly effective fluency interventions. Then, literature review will focus on the reading racetrack intervention and repeated reading interventions which will be used in this project. Finally, the literature review will focus on the effectiveness of peer coaching which will be used to measure the effectiveness of the intervention.

### **Review of the Literature**

Reading fluency is the most important skill for upper elementary students to master, because if they cannot read passages without straining to sound out words, they will never have the mental energy to begin comprehending what they are reading. Students need to be able to read and comprehend directions, word problems, social studies texts, science lab procedures, and

reading books before middle school. If a class has many students who are not meeting benchmark fluency goals, then they need to get extra help through the use of a reading fluency intervention program. There are so many different reading curriculums and programs to choose from, ranging from individual interventions to large group plans. It can be difficult to ascertain which program will impact students the most, and when students are already behind it is important to not waste instructional time on interventions that are ineffective. Research has proven that there are some aspects that make an intervention more effective, and should be included in any routine for struggling readers.

### **Aspects of Effective Fluency Interventions**

Begeny and Martens (2006) conducted a study to determine if a group-based fluency intervention would help improve students' fluency scores. Participants in the study included twelve third graders from an urban school in the Northeast United States that had been identified for needing reading assistance. The study took place over 11 weeks, with each session lasting 15-20 minutes. Students listen to the instructor read a passage as they read along silently. Students fill in words when the instructor pauses to show they are following along. Instructor would randomly pause and make a student say the next word. Students are then paired and took turns reading the passage to each other, with the nonreader helping and following along. They did each role two times. After the intervention, students were given fluency-based screening probes and word list tests. The goal of the intervention was to improve the fluency scores of these low-performing students through repeated practice. When the study was over, Begeny and Martens (2006) concluded that it was effective, as it improved students' oral reading fluency and comprehension when compared with regular classroom peers. The findings of Begeny and



Martens (2006) suggest that group fluency interventions have a significant impact and can help struggling readers catch up with their peers.

In 2015, Begeny conducted another study with a new research partner named Ross (2015). It was clear from Begeny's earlier work that group fluency interventions were successful. The new study aimed to determine what the ideal intervention duration and student-teacher ratios were for fluency interventions. The participants in the study were four second-grade students from three classrooms, who were about one grade level behind in reading ability. The study took place at a rural school in the Southeastern United States, and it lasted for eight weeks. Intervention conditions included a small group longer intervention that lasted 12-15 min; a small-group shorter intervention that lasted 6-8 min; a one-on-one longer intervention that lasted 12-15 min; and a one-on-one shorter intervention that lasted 6-8 min. The groups used the same strategies of repeated reading, modeling, and systemic error correction. The adult reads the passage and then the student repeatedly reads it, student retells the story, and words that were missed are practiced. The goal of the intervention was to determine which of these intervention formats was the most successful so that teachers could implement it in their own schools. When the study was over, Ross and Begeny (2015) concluded that whether the small group or the individualized instruction was more effective depended entirely on the students' personalities. However, it appeared that the longer intervention time of 12-15 minutes was universally the more effective intensity. The findings of Ross and Begeny (2015) suggest that group fluency interventions should be around 15 minutes long for maximum effectiveness.

Another important aspect of any fluency intervention besides group size and intervention duration is the complexity of the text students are using. O'Connor et al. (2010) attempted to figure out if students should be using independent level text or difficult level text during fluency

interventions. Would exposing students to more difficult text in their intervention time help with vocabulary acquisition and their ability to read more words per minute, or would stumbling over harder words slow them down? O'Connor et al. (2010) worked with a pool of 123 students between second and fourth grade in the Southwestern United States. They chose a few struggling readers per class in each school they included in the study. Students were either in the control group who received no extra intervention, they were in a fluency intervention with independent level text, or in the same program but with difficult level text. The goal was to see if text complexity would have any effect on the intervention's success in raising fluency scores. For the intervention, they used a repeated reading program where students are timed when reading practice passages. In the end, O'Connor et al. (2010) found no difference in outcomes between independent and difficult text levels. Both groups receiving the intervention did better than the control group, but practice reading aloud did not improve students' ability to decipher unknown words or to understand what they meant. For students to not feel discouraged, having a text level they can mostly read independently would be the best choice if O'Connor et al. (2010) suggest there is no benefit to a more difficult text level.

The last component to effective fluency intervention is aligning it to the students' general reading instruction. Stevens et al. (2020) examined whether tier 2 interventions needed to be aligned to tier 1 instruction in order to be effective. In their study, they worked with fourth graders at twelve different schools in Georgia. There were 48 students who received interventions aligned with tier 1 instruction, 49 students in the nonaligned intervention group, and 50 in the control group who only got general instruction and no intervention time. Over the course of three six-week units, the researchers gave one intervention group extra vocab and comprehension instruction that was not aligned with tier 1 content, and one group got extra

vocab and comprehension instruction that was aligned with tier 1 content. According to Stevens et al. (2020) students with aligned tier 1 and tier 2 instruction outperformed students in the nonaligned group and the control group on reading comprehension, content knowledge, and vocabulary tests. Students in the unaligned intervention scored about the same as the control group. The results of the study by Stevens et al. (2020) caution that interventions do not work if the skills students are practicing are non-transferrable to the classroom.

### **Repeated Reading with Comprehension**

Once group size, duration, and text complexity are decided on, the next step is to choose an intervention program to implement. A large study on the effectiveness of using the repeated reading format during fluency interventions was conducted by Therrien et al. in 2012. Repeated reading has been hypothesized to provide students with extra opportunities to master words and build fluency, because it involved re-reading the same passage multiple times. It has been studied by many different researchers, and has been found to have an impact on fluency skills. Therrien et al. (2012) wanted to see if fluency interventions are more effective with or without the popular repeated reading component. Therrien et al. (2012) suggest that if rereading is not needed to improve reading fluency, nonrepetitive interventions would be better, because reading many different passages instead of rereading a limited number of passages would mean students are exposed to more new vocabulary, genres, and themes.

In their study they included data from 30 students in grades 3-5 at a rural elementary school in Southeast Iowa. The study took place for four months with students receiving fluency interventions in 15-minute sessions about three times a week. Students participated in a reading intervention called Re-read-Adapt and Answer-Comprehend (RAAC) with only some students doing the repeated reading portion to test its effectiveness. The study of Therrien et al. showed

that although all students in the study showed significant growth from the beginning to the end, there was no significant difference between the two versions of the intervention. The data surprisingly was in favor of the nonrepetitive reading having a greater effect, but it was not enough to be considered statistically significant. The findings of Therrien et al. (2012) suggest that fluency interventions where students read passages and are given feedback are effective when compared to general education peers, but that it is not necessary to repeatedly read the same passage to mastery. Interventions where students practice fluency on varied passages may actually increase fluency scores and vocabulary acquisition at a greater rate.

Stocker et al. (2023) recently conducted a related fluency study at an urban elementary school in the Southeast United States. They worked with three students in third and fourth grades who were receiving special education services to attempt to increase their reading fluency. During their intervention block, the students practiced fluency building strategies for 5 to 8 min per day for about 30 school days. The first step of their intervention included the teacher modeling words from a word list. After practicing the words, the students practiced with timed fluency passages containing the words. After the first timing ended, the student received feedback on the words pronounced incorrectly. Students were given verbal praise, tangible rewards, and kept track of their scores to use as goals for the next timing. Stocker et al. (2023) saw a strong experimental effect, with students showing an increase in their rate of response and reading fluency scores. The work of Stocker et al. (2023) suggests that modeling commonly used vocabulary words and then practicing timed reading passages with error correction is a highly effective fluency intervention. This is similar to the findings of Therrien et al. (2012) because they also suggested that fluency interventions should involve reading timed passages and receiving error correction feedback, but Therrien did not feel that repeatedly reading the passages

was essential. Stocker saw strong results with his program utilizing repeated reading, whereas Therrien only saw a minimal difference between interventions with and without repeated reading.

In the similar Irish fluency study of Lambe et al. (2015) they wanted to know if precision teaching was an effective way to increase fluency scores. Precision teaching involves daily, timed practice and test sessions with goals to reach. The researchers took seven second graders without disabilities and worked with them for six weeks using precision teaching methods to practice fluency. During the intervention, the researchers used Say All Fast a Minute Every Day Shuffled (SAFMEDS) fluency cards (Phase 1) and a Dolch story (Phase 2). The aim of the study was to improve student fluency scores by repeatedly timing students practicing the words and the story, as well as correcting them on any errors they made. The results of the study showed that the students had a significant increase in Dolch sight words read correctly per minute and words per minute read aloud from a story. The work of Lambe et al. (2015) showed that students respond well to interventions that involve repeated timed practice combined with goal setting. The difference between the work of Stocker et al. (2023) and Lambe et al. (2015) is that Lambe was working with children who did not have disabilities or receive special education services, proving that repeated fluency exercises can be an effective intervention for general education students as well.

Gorsuch & Taguchi (2010) wanted to know if repeated reading with comprehension would also help English language learners with their reading fluency and comprehension. Their study was unique because their participants were not children, but adults taking college courses. These adults were still learning English, so their procedure was similar to children in the United States learning to read and speak fluently. The texts they practiced from were around a 2.8 grade

level. The adults would time themselves reading a short story for a minute as a cold read. Then they repeatedly read the passage and listened to it on an audio tape. They would read it themselves again and time it, and then they would write a report. This intervention consisted of sixteen treatments of this kind spread over eleven weeks. Gorsuch and Taguchi (2010) wanted to know if students felt they were more motivated to read after the intervention, or felt more confident to use what they learned outside of class. Based on their results, the repeated reading developed strategies the adults could use on their own to fluently read. Most of the participants also felt increasingly motivated to read and confident after the intervention.

From these studies, it seems that fluency interventions are most effective when they contain students setting goals for how many words they can read in a minute, being timed to read sight words or passages, and then being rewarded when they reach their goals. Repetition and direct modeling appear to be effective in increasing accuracy, although passages do not need to be repeated until mastery. Error correction is also an important component in these interventions, because it would be harmful for students to repeatedly read words incorrectly each time they practiced the word list or passages. One intervention that focuses on students setting goals, reading sight words, being rewarded, and engaging in error correction is called reading racetrack.

### **Reading Racetrack**

Rinaldi et al. (1997) is an early study about using reading racetrack, and it has been widely used to guide similar interventions. Reading racetrack is a game like method of teaching sight words. The study included 10 participants in the fourth grade at an urban elementary school in Washington state. In the study, the students worked on Dolch sight words with the reading racetrack intervention board. Each racetrack paper featured seven Dolch sight words randomly spread within its 28 squares. Students would read the sight words around the track out loud for

one minute to their teacher, and then when the time was up, they would count the number of words said correctly. The student would be given specific feedback on any words they missed and have them modeled correctly by the teacher. The results of the study showed that there was an immediate increase in words per minute read correctly, and that student accuracy skyrocketed as well. Rinaldi et al. (1997) was a pioneer study of the reading racetrack intervention, as it outlined the steps in detail and proved that the intervention was effective.

McGrath et al. (2012) was a more recent study about the effectiveness of the reading racetrack intervention for third graders with learning disabilities. McGrath et al. (2012) used directions from Rinaldi et al. (1997). The intervention was tested on three third grade students who were more than one year behind their peers in reading ability. The study took place at an elementary school in the Pacific Northwest in a special education resource classroom. McGrath et al. (2012) followed the previously mentioned routine for the intervention, where students read sight words placed around a racetrack game board for one minute to their teacher. In this study, students were tested on the number of correct words per minute they could read. They also engaged in error correction, with the adult modeling the missed words and making the students repeat them correctly. McGrath et al. (2012) saw a correlation between the implementation of the reading racetrack intervention and a higher sight word fluency rate. They mentioned that students who participated in the intervention looked forward to it and felt that it was beneficial to them. It is a low-cost intervention and it is easy to integrate into a classroom routine, because it does not take very much time to implement. The work of McGrath et al. (2012) shows that reading racetracks has stood the test of time and remains an effective intervention to increase sight word fluency.

In the study of Davenport et al. (2019) they wanted to know if it was beneficial to give teachers behavioral skills training to better implement a reading racetrack intervention. The study took place at a private school that serves kindergarten through eighth grade students. The researchers trained three different teachers during the study. At the start of the study, teacher participants were given a written description of a reading racetrack and instructions on how to teach it, and asked to read it for ten minutes. Then they performed the intervention with another staff member, and this was recorded as a baseline for how many steps they implemented correctly. Next, each teacher was given direct behavioral skills training on how to perform the intervention. The training involved modeling the steps with another staff member as the pretend students and receiving feedback on their delivery. Davenport et al. (2019) also answered teachers' questions about the intervention procedure until they had mastered the directions. Teachers and students in the study saw amazing growth with sight word recognition from the reading racetrack routine when it was implemented correctly. Davenport et al. (2019) proved that in order for a reading racetrack intervention to be successful, teachers need to have time to process the steps themselves and model it with other adults.

One of the most influential studies for my school improvement project was David Coker's study from 2022 where he implemented the reading racetracks program with students in partners, instead of 1:1 with adults. Coker (2022) wanted to know if using the reading racetrack intervention with peer tutoring would improve the reading fluency of struggling third-graders. In this study, the students met four times a week for 15 minutes each session. In the intervention, students "raced" around the track reading sight words out loud to a peer coach instead of a teacher. As they read the sight word cards, they engaged in error correction of any words they misread. Students who read from the racetrack were rewarded for beating their goals, and



coaches were rewarded for tracking while their partner read and doing error correction with their partner. Motivation is key for interventions like reading racetrack that are repetitive. Coker (2022) advised that verbal praise, goal setting, graphing scores, and peer involvement were all great motivators. His approach was very effective in increasing the reading fluency of the sight words by students in the study, and the effect of the intervention was still evident even ten weeks after the intervention was finished. The research of Coker's 2022 study showed that reading racetrack with peer coaches can be an effective strategy to increase sight word recognition and motivate students.

### **Peer Coaching**

Hofstadter-Duke and Daly (2011) wanted to investigate if incorporating a peer tutoring routine would increase fluency scores, or if it would distract from the intervention. The study took place in Nebraska and only included one first-grade girl who had been referred for reading problems. She had no known diagnoses and received no special education services. Three children in the same classroom were selected by the teacher to be peer tutors. All chosen tutors exceeded the classroom average reading performance. The tutoring took place for six weeks, with the participants working on one passage per week. The intervention included listening to the teacher model the reading passage, repeated readings of the passage, and error correction. If the student exceeded her previous score, she got a reward afterwards. The teacher trained the peer tutors using explanations, modeling, and practice of the protocol once the student was used to the routine. The goal of the study was to increase the student's reading fluency ability, and once the peer tutoring routine began there was a clear increase in performance. Although the study of Hofstadter-Duke and Daly (2011) only featured one student, it showed that peer tutoring can have a significant positive effect on a struggling reader's motivation and scores.

Marr et al. (2011) had a similar but larger study where they also wanted to know if they could increase the oral reading fluency of students through a peer coaching fluency intervention. The intervention was tested on 34 second graders from 14 different elementary schools in North Carolina. Marr et al. (2011) did the repeated reading program with peer coaching for an entire school year with the same students. Once in the routine, it only takes about 10-12 minutes to do the intervention, which is very practical for classroom application. For the intervention, the students are partnered up to read the passage chorally, with one being the stronger reader (the peer coach) and one being the weaker reader. When students finished the first read of the passage, they would raise their hands. When everyone was finished, the partners would read aloud again, alternating sentences. Then, the weaker reader reads the passage aloud on their own and the coach helps them with any unknown words. The students in the intervention showed significant growth in fluency scores. Their comprehension ability also increased, because as they could read more fluently, they had more energy to devote to comprehension. The work of Marr et al. (2011) proved that repeated reading with peer coaches could increase fluency and comprehension ability for both of the partners involved.

In the study of Dufrene et al. (2010), they looked at the impact of a peer tutoring program for reading fluency with 4 middle school students who received Tier II reading support. During their intervention time, they had three peer tutors who would help their four at-risk students. The tutor students would record the session first. Then, the tutee would repeatedly read the same passage aloud until it was completed twice, with the tutor correcting any errors. Then, they would do a timed reading of the passage. The results of the study of Dufrene et al. (2010) indicated that students' fluency rate on increased following the implementation of the peer tutoring procedure. Moreover, peer tutors implemented most steps of the procedure effectively

on their own. In this example, peer tutoring was effective, but the students were older and were selectively chosen because they were gifted and responsible.

Sato and Lyster (2012) also explored how peer interaction with corrective feedback could improve a fluency intervention. This time, the peer reading study was conducted at a university in Japan, with Japanese college students who were functional readers and writers but spoke English badly. For forty minutes each week, over the course of ten weeks, the students engaged in the fluency building intervention. During the practice time, the students were paired up, and with each new partner they had to say what the previous partner had said to them. They would have to speak faster and remember more details each time they switched. In this way, they were practicing repeatedly and gaining confidence. They also engaged in corrective feedback, responding to each other's errors. Although this study was conducted with college age students, they were still learning to speak English fluently as our young American students do. Sato and Lyster (2012) highlighted the fact that peer interaction is effective in improving fluency, but peer interaction with corrective feedback is even more effective.

## **School Profile**

### **Community Characteristics**

The school improvement project is for Emerson Hough elementary school in Newton, Iowa. Newton is a town of about 16,000 people about 30 minutes East of Des Moines. Newton used to be a larger, more affluent town when the Maytag company which manufactured washing machines was based there. Maytag went bankrupt in the early 2000's, and with that many people in the town lost their jobs. Many of these people only had a high school diploma and had worked their way up there, making a good living. Newton struggled through the 2010's due to this

combined with the housing crisis in 2008, and many local businesses closed as well. Newton had a recent resurgence of manufacturing jobs, making wind turbines, wheels, and other materials. Around this time, Newton also had many African Americans moving in from Chicago and new immigrants resettling from Des Moines, Marshalltown, and Cedar Rapids. With these changes, Newton became much more diverse than it was in the past.

### **District Characteristics**

The Newton Community School District serves around 3,000 students between preschool and 12<sup>th</sup> grade as of 2024. Their mission statement says that the district “empowers every learner to achieve a lifetime of personal success.” (Newton Community School District, 2024) They have four elementary schools, one middle school, one general high school and one alternative high school. They are currently in the process of planning to consolidate to two elementary schools due to decreasing student enrollment and the high costs of renovating and staffing all four buildings. Two buildings will be renovated, and two will be closed. The process of consolidating the elementary schools is supposed to provide more consistency throughout the district. Across grade levels, teachers will meet more easily and have the same standards for grades and curriculum. With the new building plan, students should also be organized more evenly socioeconomically, although students will have to travel farther to get to school. The changes have been difficult so far for the district, because both parents and teachers are unhappy. Parents dislike the fact that they have to travel farther, meaning kids can no longer walk to school. Teachers dislike that they have been reassigned without any say in what building or grade level they will teach. However, other than the years spent moving as buildings are being renovated, students should benefit from the newly renovated buildings and more reliable teaching.

### **School Mission and Values**

Emerson Hough is a K-4 elementary school. Our Emerson Hough school motto is “Emerson Hough, Cardinal Tough,” because our students are resilient. We always say that the students who attend our school are all “our kids” and we try to help them and their families whenever possible. Emerson Hough has been viewed as a school with a poor or problematic student body, but they are good kids who often have troubled backgrounds.

### **School Characteristics**

As previously mentioned, Emerson Hough is often viewed as the “bad” elementary school in town, but that view is not shared by the teachers or families who have ties to the building. Emerson Hough is a historic building from the 1920’s which has been renovated within the last decade, making it both beautiful on the outside and updated inside. The building holds K-4<sup>th</sup> grade students, with two or three class sections of each. We also have the district’s extended core program, where students with significant disabilities receive special education services all day instead of attending a classroom with their grade-level peers. Most of the extended core students come to the classroom for a few subjects and attend recess and specials with their peers. We have a lot of ELL students because many of them live in the low-income housing near our school, and also because all of the high needs ELL students for the district get transferred to Emerson Hough due to the fact that there is only one full time ELL teacher and she is in our building. Our English proficiency data on the Iowa Department of Education website states that only 1 out of our 22 ELL students is designated as “proficient” at English based on test data, meaning they need a lot of support (State of Iowa, 2023). Our attendance rate is 92%, and our chronic absenteeism is about 28.7%, with the low socioeconomic children being absent most often (State of Iowa, 2023). The students often have troubled home lives or live in poverty,

making it hard to consistently get to school. We house a food bank closet and give out grocery supplies monthly to local families, and we also have in-person therapy sessions here weekly with Capstone for students who need extra support. We do our best to help ease the burden for families in our area who are suffering from trauma or poverty. The students love Emerson Hough, because it is their safe place, it is clean and consistent and the adults care about them. We have highly effective teachers, many of which have been teaching for over a decade. Right now, we only have two teachers who still have their initial license, and everyone else has more experience. As you can see, Emerson Hough is a great building with an extremely invested staff and various specialty programs to better meet student needs. Emerson Hough's reputation for being a "bad" school is solely based on the assumptions of affluent people who do not want their children to come into contact with diverse students who come from a different background than their children do.

### **Student Characteristics**

In the 2022-2023 school year, we had 224 students (Common Core of Data, 2023). Usually, each classroom has between 15 and 22 students, which is a good teacher to student ratio. About 66% of our students are white, with the next largest group being Hispanic students (Common Core of Data, 2023). We have students of many different ethnicities here at Emerson Hough, and some have newly immigrated from other countries. About 69% of our students would be eligible for free and reduced lunch, but due to our extreme need our building has had free lunches ever since 2020 (Common Core of Data, 2023). As far as academics go, in the 2022-2023 school year Emerson Hough ranked in the bottom 50% of schools in the state for proficiency in math and reading (State of Iowa, 2023). This shows that many of our students are behind in grade level standards, resulting in poor test scores.

## **Student Learning Goals**

In the past, Emerson Hough was a low-scoring Title 1 school. People in the community would say that Emerson Hough was the “bad” school and that our low scores made sense because of the types of families we serve. Because we have many ELL students, impoverished students, students with traumatic home lives or incarcerated parents, or students with behavior plans, it was expected that we would not do well. Staff were trying their best, but we were not seeing much growth in our students.

Our district superintendent made some big changes in curriculum and administration two years ago, as he was tired of our low reading scores in particular. We switched from Wonders reading curriculum to Amplify CKLA. For leadership, the principal who had been presiding over Emerson Hough for almost a decade was sent to another elementary school, and Tara Zehr, who had been the principal of the alternative high school, was sent in to replace her. Mrs. Zehr was known for her community building events, increased parental involvement, and behavior management strategies, which EH needed. Under Mrs. Zehr’s leadership, Emerson Hough has excelled. We rose an entire category on the state’s ranking of school ability, from needs improvement to acceptable. We were designated as a high performing school, and went from the lowest scoring among the seven schools in our district to fourth highest in just two years (State of Iowa, 2023).

For our district, third graders have academic goals set for reading fluency rate in words per minute as well as scores for MAP reading and math standardized tests. The fluency goal for the spring for third graders is 126 words per minute. The MAP RIT score goal is 189 for reading and 194 for math. For both English language arts and math, Emerson Hough students score just below the state achievement average of 50% proficiency (State of Iowa, 2023). State data also

shows our “all students” category is higher performing all around than the “white students” category, meaning that minority students are not underserved or disadvantaged here (State of Iowa, 2023). Our white, low-socioeconomic students appear to be achieving the least, and are also absent the most. The students in the disability category are almost matching the state average, meaning we serve our special education students well here (State of Iowa, 2023).

### **Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement is generally low when it comes to academics. Many parents of students at Emerson Hough are uneducated themselves, having not graduated high school or gone to an alternative high school. In the third grade, we have a lot of parents who do not support children by doing homework with them or reading with them at home because they do not understand the homework themselves and do not feel reading is important. Of course, this is not all parents. Some are quite involved and want their children to have a better life than they have, so they push them to practice at home and help them with schoolwork. I have found that many of my immigrant parents are more involved in their children’s academic progress than other parents, and are more respectful of teachers.

### **Teacher Work**

The current group of third graders that I work with at Emerson Hough have persistently low reading fluency scores. As mentioned, the school district has been making changes and improvements to staffing and curriculum within the last few years. This group of third graders had their kindergarten year cut short due to COVID precautions, and then had to make up for lost time and reteach kindergarten content in first grade. They had many gaps in their knowledge of letter sounds and phonics rules coming into second grade. In second grade, they were piloting the new reading curriculum, meaning teachers were not as confident and they were unsure which



content was the highest priority to teach. Students in this grade level are struggling to comprehend material in class and on standardized tests because they are still stuck in the stage of sounding out words and trying to read fluently.

To combat this, our grade level team met with our reading specialist from the AEA and our Title 1 reading interventionists before the school year began to create a plan to meet their needs. We decided that because the entire grade was below 50% proficiency, we needed a whole class intervention each day on top of the usual reading intervention small groups. We implemented a whole class fluency intervention where a passage is split into chunks of three sentences. The teacher models the chunk while the students follow along. Then, they read it every other word in partners. Then, the stronger reader reads the entire chunk out loud, followed by the weaker reader. This pattern continues until the passage is completed. Students also take part in reading intervention small groups every day for 30 minutes. We track their fluency data, comprehension, and phonics skills and place them in groups accordingly. Each group lasts between 4-6 weeks and then data is collected again to see if students are progressing or if they need to switch things up. Some interventions we have employed include UFLI, repeated reading, Word Mix-Up, and Read Live. Some students are in Title 1 groups or special education reading SDI at this time as well.

### **Curriculum Design**

Third grade reading curriculum often focuses more on teaching students how to read for information, such as main idea, cause and effect, or sequence. There is a big focus on answering questions and comprehension, but it is expected that by third grade students can fluently read. Our previous curriculum, Wonders, had small group fluency instruction built into the daily routine. Our current curriculum, Amplify CKLA, does not have a daily fluency component. With

our Amplify CKLA reading curriculum, students usually have either a long read-aloud where the teacher reads materials and students look at pictures on a slideshow, or we have chapters in our student reader where they can also read the text. It is up to each individual teacher to implement instructional strategies that allow students to practice fluency every day.

### **Instructional Strategies**

During core reading instruction, we have made an effort to increase our fluency building strategies. Some fluency building strategies I have employed are different ways to read the chapter and have students track the text more or read aloud more. We do a lot of choral reading, where the entire class reads a chunk of text out loud in unison. We also echo read titles, questions, and captions. For echo reading, the teacher reads it out loud and then the students repeat it. I often utilize cloze reading for longer texts, which is where I read the passage out loud as the students track with their fingers, and then I occasionally leave out a word. They then have to say the word out loud. I usually attempt to leave out at least one word per sentence. We sometimes partner read or small group read the texts, with students alternating back and forth. The disadvantage to this partner reading is that oftentimes when it is not their turn to read, students space off instead of reading along silently in their head.

### **Assessment Practices**

We have to assess every special education and Title 1 student each week on their reading fluency. We have testing windows three times a year to officially score general education students on their fluency as well. The third-grade teachers still progress monitor the general education students on their fluency about bi-weekly to ensure they are making regular progress. We also take the MAP reading test three times a year, and the ISASP test once in the spring. We

use the MAP reading test to determine comprehension ability and general reading scores. It is also used to qualify students for Title 1 status and be considered “at risk” if they score below benchmark twice consecutively.

Using the MAP test as the criteria to be entered into Title 1 small group reading services is frustrating, because a student must do poorly on the test twice to be admitted. Since the test is only given three times a year, that means a student needing help may have to wait until they “fail” the test in January to be admitted into services, even when their classroom teacher can see a need based on their poor fluency test scores and phonics knowledge in the fall. Students also cannot have accommodations to have the computer read the MAP math test directions/problems to them unless they have a reading goal on their IEP, meaning low performing students without IEP’s do poorly on math tests. This ties their math performance to their reading ability more than their ability to solve math problems, and is inaccurate. Due to the current third grade’s generally low reading fluency, math test scores have also been impacted.

Third grade students had incredible growth between the fall and winter testing sessions this year, climbing from 45% proficient on MAP reading to 71%. Fluency rose as well, but at a less aggressive rate. CBMr scores went up from 40% proficient in the fall to 50% in the winter. It is clear that for progress to continue, students need more intensive fluency interventions before the spring testing window.

### **Professional Development**

Our district professional development days are typically spent on behavior management training instead of academics, like Boys Town training. We do a lot of district level academic work with our grade level teams. We have chosen which standards are the most critical, gone

through our curriculum and chosen common formative assessments embedded in our curriculum which demonstrate these standards, and made an assessment tracker to share data between buildings. We meet and discuss the grading criteria and better ways to teach standards students are struggling with. This is meant to improve consistence in grading and instruction between all four elementary schools. The third-grade team at Emerson Hough has not received any professional development in reading fluency as a team. Some members of the team have taken “Making Reading Heavenly” phonics fluency training several years ago by paying for it themselves, and some have taken “Science of Reading” training through the school. One member of the team is a new teacher, and has received no training specifically for reading besides his college education. I feel that it would be beneficial for all lower elementary school teachers to be enrolled in a reading training every few years, but each grade level may have different needs. For example, kindergarten and first grade focus more on letter sounds and phonics skills, whereas third graders are learning to read fluently and comprehend.

### **Needs Assessment**

At Emerson Hough, less than 50% of our students across all grades are deemed proficient by the state in reading (State of Iowa, 2023). The state of Iowa’s school report card rating listed Emerson Hough as “acceptable” based on our test scores, participation rate, growth rate, and conditions for learning (State of Iowa, 2023). The range goes as follows from low to high: priority, needs improvement, acceptable, commendable, high performing, and exceptional (State of Iowa, 2023). Although Emerson Hough has recently improved, because we had been listed as “needs improvement” for many years, we should still be attempting to score higher. A large percentage of our rating is based on assessment growth and scores. In order for Emerson Hough to improve, our students need to become better readers. Due to their poor reading performance,

third grade is the grade which has the highest need. Based on the fall standardized MAP and CBMR tests, 45% of third graders were proficient on the standardized reading test, and only 40% were proficient on the reading fluency passages.

After seeing the third grader's low reading test scores, the district's goal for the third graders at Emerson Hough was to have 54% of students reach the winter FAST fluency benchmark of 110 words per minute. The fact that our goal was barely over half shows just how far below grade level this group of students is. This group of children has been a grade level behind since kindergarten, when they lost a lot of key phonics instruction due to COVID school closures. They had to be retaught a lot of kindergarten content in first grade, meaning they could not move on to decoding bigger words or learning word patterns as quickly. Then in second grade, they were reteaching phonics skills instead of building reading fluency. Enough is enough- these kids need to get grade level content and strong interventions to close the gap they have struggled with for years. We have a built-in intervention time for reading each day that is 30 minutes long, where some kids go to Title reading groups, special education groups, or skill-based groups led by the third-grade teachers. We track data frequently at our school, because we need to be able to see if what we are teaching is working or if we need to switch up our instruction. We tried various interventions before the winter testing period in our groups with some success. We tried to implement fluency building opportunities throughout our core math and reading instruction as well. Math and reading MAP test scores had increased to 71% proficiency by the winter, which is a great success, but reading fluency was still low at just 50%. I was interested in what other programs we could implement whole group or during our intervention time to see gains in fluency, as that is the area students still struggle the most in.

Fluency is an essential skill for upper elementary students. In first grade, students learn to read sentences. In second grade, they practice the skills learned in first grade to read paragraphs, as well as learning decoding patterns to say and spell more words on their own. By third grade, students are no longer “learning to read,” but are “reading to learn.” This means they should know how to decode words already, and should have many sight words memorized. They should be able to fluently read paragraphs of grade level text. Then, students can focus on comprehending the text, and answering questions about main idea, author’s purpose, and theme. Students who have reading problems in third and fourth grade will have difficulty reading with enough accuracy and speed to comprehend texts (Begeny et al. 2006). If our third graders at Emerson Hough are unable to read fluently, they will can’t read grade-level passages on their own and answer questions about them. Their lack of fluency will affect their performance in math, science, and social studies as well, because they will be unable to read directions and subject-specific passages. Emerson Hough’s third grade class was in need of serious fluency interventions in order to become fluent readers.

### **Data Analysis**

The data that supports our need for fluency intervention is based on our MAP assessments and our Fastbridge CBMr assessment. A strength in our data is that our students were growing in all areas from the fall to winter testing windows. The third-grade team has been working very hard to get these kids caught up, devoting all of our free time to improving reading scores. We saw positive trend lines from every kid during winter testing, but the growth was simply not happening quickly enough. Figure 1 below details the percentage of third grade students at Emerson Hough elementary school who were proficient on the MAP standardized tests and the CBMr fluency test at each testing period.

**Figure 1***Table detailing standardized test proficiency rates*

<b>% Students Proficient- CBMr</b>	
Fall	40%
Winter	50% (24/48)
Spring	Have not taken yet
<b>% Students Proficient- MAP Reading</b>	
Fall	45% (22/48)
Winter	71% (34/48)
Spring	Have not taken yet
<b>% Students Proficient- MAP Math</b>	
Fall	49% (23/48)
Winter	71% (34/48)
Spring	Have not taken yet

The data tells me that our third-grade students were behind grade level in both math and reading at the start of the school year. However, they have made incredible growth in math and reading and reached 71% proficiency by winter. This tells me that our math and reading curriculum and instructional strategies are effective and outside interventions are not needed in the area of math or core reading. As for reading fluency, the students showed some growth on the CBMr test in the winter, but still hovered at only 50% proficiency. This indicated reading fluency as our grade level's area of weakness.

Fluency is an area of weakness in our testing data and our reading curriculum as well. In many other reading curriculums, students have leveled readers. They have the same content at a beginning, intermediate, and advanced level of text. Students are able to practice skills like main idea, theme, or sequence at their reading level. Our current curriculum, Amplify, does not have any leveled texts. By third grade, our Amplify student readers are no longer decodable. This

means that if students already struggle with phonics skills and are unable to confidently identify words without sounding them out, they will be unable to read many words in the book. Students are not given opportunities to practice fluently reading grade level or just below grade level text. Without outside interventions, students will not be able to close the gap in their fluency proficiency.

We needed to give our students a basic phonics screener after the fall testing to assess the gaps in their background knowledge which might be hindering their fluency ability. Based on the test data, the third-grade team did a few rounds of phonics interventions first to fill knowledge gaps that make students unable to quickly decode words. After each intervention group, which were usually about 2-4 weeks, we would re-assess them with the phonics screener. After any fluency focused intervention groups, we would also have them take the CBMr progress monitoring passages to see if there has been growth. We will also have to give the MAP and CBMr tests again in the spring to assess whether our students have grown from the interventions they have been given since the winter.

### **Action Plan**

Knowing our students have poor fluency scores, they need effective fluency interventions before the end of the school year. Any good fluency intervention needs to have several key components. First, it needs to include repeated reading of passages or sight words while being timed, aiming to beat a goal (Stocker et al., 2023). Next, it needs to involve students tracking progress towards that goal and being motivated to do so with praise or tangibles (Coker, 2022). Then the timing and group size needs to be considered. The most effective interventions were longer and more frequent, from 10 to 15 minutes daily for a number of weeks (Ross and Begeny, 2015). The higher a group size gets towards 10, the less effective it will be, so the most effective



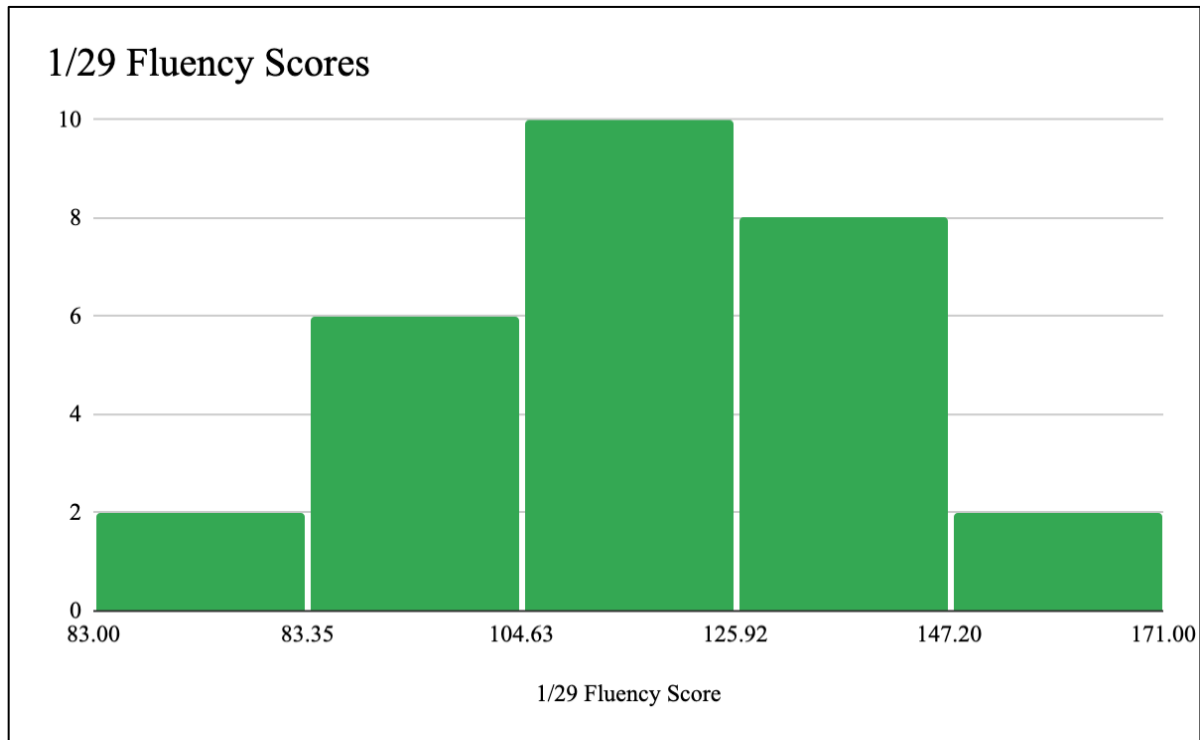
group size is 1:1, followed by groups less than three (Ross and Begeny, 2015). Interventions where peers interact 1:1 with adult monitoring are highly effective as well (Begeny and Martens, 2006).

Considering the aspects of programs that have been proven to work and the ones that I have access to, I came up with an intervention plan. During my intervention time slot, which is 30 minutes daily, we will run two short interventions. Both interventions will involve students working in partner groups. One will be focused on sight word recognition, as improving sight word knowledge is proven to increase fluency. The other will focus on repeated reading with comprehension. Before the intervention, all students will have their fluency rate in words per minute progress monitored on FASTbridge's CBMR test. Then we will do the same in four weeks after the intervention is done.

I had thirty-one students that were not in special education or Title groups during intervention time. I first compiled a spreadsheet with all of the student names, their homeroom classes, and their most recent fluency score. Then I sorted the sheet by fluency score from low to high, so we could see the students by ability level instead of class. Next, I split the data into thirds. The top third of students had scores above the spring proficiency benchmark. The middle third of students are below the spring benchmark, but projected to reach it by the end of the year. The lower third of students are not projected to reach the spring fluency benchmark. Figure 2 below shows the frequency distribution of fluency levels for most of the third graders involved as of the end of January before the interventions began. As you can see, we had more students near or below the spring proficiency benchmark than we had above the benchmark.

**Figure 2**

*Chart showing the frequency distribution of fluency levels for third graders as of 1/29/2024*



The new fluency intervention needed to involve peer tutoring, and each group would have a high reader and a low reader. There are three classroom teachers, our principal, and an aide who are able to help run intervention groups. I decided that the three classroom teachers would run my intervention plan with small groups, and the principal and aide would have another group doing an alternate plan. The nine kids in the middle of the data who were projected to reach 125 by the end of the year, but had not yet reached it, were sent to the group manned by my principal and aide to do the computer-based program ReadLive. The remaining 22 students above and below this group were partnered up. Each group had one high reader and one low reader. The students were split into three smaller groups, one for each classroom teacher, as shown in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3***Table showing the number of students in each intervention group*

Student intervention groups			
Mrs. Zehr and Ms. Shaw	Mrs. Barr	Mrs. Halferty	Mr. Vanderlaan
ReadLive	Fluency Intervention	Fluency Intervention	Fluency Intervention
9 students	8 students	6 students	8 students

In summary, our third graders continue to have low fluency scores. Many are hovering in the range just below grade level, and with some more intense intervention, they could reach the spring proficiency score of 125 words per minute. The spring goal set by the district for class-wide proficiency is 63%, and I would like to see my class exceed that.

### **Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

#### **Timeline**

The first step to implementing the intervention was using data to decide the students in each group and the peer partners. As mentioned before, this was done based on the students' reading fluency scores, and three small groups would be taking part in the new intervention plan. After the groups were put together, the next step was to write a teacher guide with instructions for the other two teachers who would be implementing it. In the teacher guide, I detailed the steps of the intervention so that each teacher would know what to do with their group. Once the guide was completed, I set a date to meet with my third-grade team and model the plan and give them their teacher guides. At this meeting I also had my team review the partner groups to ensure all students would be able to work efficiently with their partners. After writing the teacher guide,

I needed to then collect materials for the intervention so I could distribute them to the other teachers.

## **Resources**

For this intervention, we needed different types of resources. I needed folders for each pair of partners which would contain all of their materials. In each folder, there were two fluency graphs, a paper with the questions for comprehension, the fluency stories, the reading racetrack, and the reading racetrack score sheet. We used the fluency stories from FastBridge's repeated reading with comprehension files. The comprehension questions were also found on the FastBridge website. With their folders, the students also needed plastic bags with crayons to color in their fluency graphs, pencils to mark their scores, and timers. To keep the students motivated, we also needed tangible rewards. I ordered scratch and sniff stickers, a big bucket of bubble gum, and fun stamps for their hands. All of the materials were gathered and sorted so that each teacher would have everything they needed to begin their intervention.

## **Responsibilities**

### ***Teacher***

As the intervention teacher, it is my responsibility to ensure partner groups are working effectively, and that students are being corrected on words they were missing. The teacher will have to fill in for members of any partner groups who have one member absent. Any teacher running the intervention will also need to make sure to plan ahead and copy passages to read for each week, have enough tangible rewards stocked, and keep all materials organized.

### ***Grade Level Team***

When I met with the other members of the third-grade team, we discussed our responsibilities. We would each faithfully follow the intervention plan for four weeks. If the intervention was successful, then students would show growth by having a positive change in their fluency score. After the four weeks, we would meet again to discuss if the students progressed or not, and what we would like to change about the intervention. If students are not working well with their current partners, they could also be switched at this time.

### ***Parents/Families***

Although parents and families are not directly involved in the daily fluency intervention, they are important to their children's fluency success. Parents know their children, and working with them at home can add more instructional time that struggling readers need (Bilgi, 2020). Students receive reading homework each Monday that is a fluency story with comprehension questions. Parents need to be timing their student all three times and going through the questions with them in order to support fluency growth. Parents also need to be reading with their children, or making them read independently each week. By third grade, students need to be reading chapter books, which they can check out for free at school or at our large public library. Students are ultimately the ones reading and practicing, but parents are the ones who can encourage them to do it.

### ***Students***

Students are responsible for the success of their intervention as well. They must ensure that they are reading to the best of their ability each time. This means that while the adult or their partner is reading, they are tracking along with their fingers and reading in their heads. Partner groups must go through the reading comprehension questions, and re-read if they do not know

the answers. Time management is important, and students must stay on task to get their work done in the limited intervention time.

### **Progress monitoring**

The grade level team recorded baseline fluency scores from each student in the intervention group at the end of January, before the intervention began. My team will progress monitor our students for their fluency scores at the end of weeks two and four. Progress monitoring will be done using third grade level passages from FastBridge. Students are timed for one minute, with the teacher marking off any missed words or lines to assess their reading speed and accuracy. Progress monitoring scores will be entered onto a spreadsheet so that all teachers in the group can see the scores and discuss them.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

There are some challenges to the fluency routine that I can foresee. One difficult aspect to manage is that some of our students strongly desire the rewards, and will be willing to fudge the results in order to earn them. Because students are timing themselves to beat their score, they could pause the timer, or set it for a longer amount of time to get higher scores. They could also color in their graph higher than it should be or write a higher number of words read in order to reach their goal. Hopefully, their partner would not allow them to do this, but some of our kids are quite sneaky. If we know their average fluency scores, it is easy to tell if they exaggerate much too high. This can also be combatted by standing by a suspect group as they read to monitor them, or by the adult timing the whole group at once with their timer. Another issue that stems from the rewards system is that some kids will take it personally if they do not get a reward during the intervention, especially if their partner does get one. To combat this, we

decided that they would get cardinal cash, our school reward system, if they were working hard and good partners. This way, even if they did not earn a candy or sticker, they still got something. The system has the potential to really motivate students and boost scores as long as all teachers involved can effectively manage student behavior during group time.

### **Conclusion**

Fluency is the speed at which students read stories, and it is an essential skill for students to master. The problem is that students in the third grade at Emerson Hough Elementary School are disproportionately below fluency benchmark scores compared to other grade levels. These students are stuck on sounding out words instead of having automaticity, and it slows them down. Until students can stop using a lot of mental effort on saying words correctly, they do not have the capacity to think about what the words mean. This leaves them unable to comprehend grade level texts. To increase their fluency scores, they needed strong fluency interventions.

The third graders at Emerson Hough went through four weeks of vocabulary and fluency interventions. By the end of the four weeks, we met to discuss what worked and what did not work during the intervention. We agreed that the reading racetrack routine was easy to manage and was helping students instantly recognize sight words. However, students were reading the words much faster than we originally planned, making four or five laps instead of the one or two we anticipated. We felt that the sight word routine would no longer be needed after the four weeks was up, because students seemed to be missing very few words.

Repeated reading with comprehension had a more difficult routine. Students practiced well with their partners most days, but managing the rewards for the readings was a bit tricky. Students were supposed to get a tangible reward like a stamp, sticker, or candy when they beat

their score from the previous day. However, they read a new story each time, making it difficult to beat the previous score because it was all new content. Since students often knew they would not be able to beat their scores easily, a few began to fudge their scores. If we had to do it again, we would have students do a cold read and hot read of the same story to beat their times. That way they had practiced the words and should increase their scores.

When reviewing data, we decided that the intervention was only mildly successful. We had 15 out of the 23 students increase their fluency scores. We had three who remained the same, and five who went down. Of course, when progress monitoring, we only had three data points. We had a story before the intervention, during, and after. At the end of the intervention cycle, we had ten students in the intervention group who were still not reaching the spring fluency goal of 125 words per minute. These ten students were all the lower readers within the partner groups, so it was not necessarily anticipated they would reach the spring goal within the timeframe of the intervention. My team made a few changes to the routine moving forward and switched the partners up, and decided to proceed with it for a few more weeks to gather more data.



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