



Birth to Grade 12 Literacy graduates Sabrina Irvin (photo at left) and Gina Gerard credit the program for inspiring them and equipping them with the skills to be effective teachers.

Graduates of St. Bonaventure’s Birth to Grade 12 Literacy program share tales of success

Two recent graduates of St. Bonaventure University’s master’s level program in Birth to Grade 12 Literacy say the program is a gateway to opportunity that has put them on the path to professional success.

They share their experiences in a question-and-answer format below.

The 12-month, 36-credit-hour program is available in hybrid or online formats. Courses include methods and theory knowledge, learning how to teach reading, foundations of coaching and reading assessment. Instead of a thesis paper, a take-home comprehensive assessment with collective e-portfolio is a final requirement that allows graduates to share their talents with prospective employers.

Unique to Bona this year is a dual elementary/secondary 100-hour practicum experience in a short seven-week summer experience while K-12 school is not in session, perfect for the working teacher.

At the heart of it all, the program allows students to gain hands-on or virtual field experience, learning to assess and diagnose reading abilities followed by the St. Bonaventure Reading Center practicum (SBURC), and opportunities to provide coaching professional development by and for peers and parents alike.

A hallmark of the program is the SBURC practicum experience, which covers K-12 grade ranges, ensuring that teachers get practical experience across grade levels to take with them into their careers. Known as The Reading Center, its reputation is solid among the community as parents clamor to enroll their children in the practicum, often resulting in a waiting list. The program has its own children’s library with upwards of 3,500 books available in hard copy and a growing online format.

Q&A with recent graduates Sabrina Irvin and Gina Gerard

Sabrina Irvin, a 2014 undergraduate of St. Bonaventure University who earned her literacy graduate degree in spring 2020, teaches special education at Hinsdale Central School, Hinsdale, New York.

One of your strengths is creating engaging materials for students. How did the B-12 program help you develop that trait?

Irvin: The B-12 education program helped inspire me to create engaging materials for my kids by teaching me that color in the classroom helps students feel welcome. When children feel welcome and enjoy the material they are learning, they are more likely to engage and absorb the materials being taught.

Was there one particular experience in the program that helped you become more comfortable in front of a classroom?

Irvin: I would most certainly say that the Field Block experience is a huge help in the journey of being in the classroom and taking on roles of the cooperating teacher before taking the leap into the teaching world.

How much did the program allow you to grow and evolve as an educator and what lessons did you take from it to use in your classroom every day?

Irvin: The entire B-12 program at St. Bonaventure gives a multitude of opportunities to grow and develop as an educator in the classroom. There is field experience, projects, reports, assessments, and so much more that help contribute to becoming a successful teacher.

Did you teach classes while also taking courses at Bona's? If so, how did that experience help you?

Irvin: As a determined mother of three small children and a teacher already out in the field, I was able to take classes at St. Bonaventure. Thankfully, the classes were flexible, the professors and the scheduling worked with my everyday life schedule, and I was able to work while completing my master's degree.

This experience helped me because for two days a week, it allowed me to see my life through the lens of a child's life — trying to juggle all the important things in life while also completing school work and reaching to achieve my goal.

Irvin, on her current position at Hinsdale Central School:

I started working for Hinsdale Central School in August 2018. I started as a fifth-grade math and science teacher. Due to budget cuts, I was moved to a special education position, where I am currently placed.

I ended up at Hinsdale after applying to many different positions in the area. There was just something about Hinsdale's size and proximity to my home that made it a perfect choice for me.

I love every Bobcat (school mascot) that I work with and wouldn't trade my Hinsdale Bobcat family for anything.

While I love it here, it's not to say there haven't seen trying times, especially amid the pandemic. It was difficult to transition to complete remote learning, but it was an eye opener. There were struggles and there were successes. Today, almost a year later, we take nothing for granted and we plan every day as if we were to go remote tomorrow. It's just a possibility that is so out of our control.

Sheri Voss, program and SBURC director, on Irvin:

Sabrina is an amazing, selfless individual who teaches at Hinsdale with three young children of her own. She is incredibly astute in creating engaging materials for not only her students, but to share with her classmates as well.

Sabrina would often come to class with materials related to the week's topics that she had created for her students as copies for all of her peers. When the Reading Center pivoted to be online with only a weekend's notice, Sabrina worked diligently alongside me and her peers to create an incredible "falling in love with reading" experience for the readers enrolled in our practicum. We quickly enrolled with online reading platforms and became experts in the world of Zoom.

Sabrina engaged with a strong heartbeat to make her SBURC world the best it could be through incessant planning and preparedness as the backbone to teaching success. She even went out of her way to help me deliver closing ceremony packages to our participants.

We are proud to call her a Bonnie. Sabrina represents the mission of the literacy program in her dedication and zest for teaching reading across all disciplines. Her concern for every child by meeting each one where he or she is in an individual zone of proximal development is exactly the outcome the literacy program is designed to instill.

Gina Gerard graduated in 2018 with undergraduate degrees in elementary education and history, and in 2019 with a master's degree in literacy. She received the Outstanding Academic Achievement Award for Excellence in the Graduate Literacy Curriculum. Originally from Amherst, New York, Gerard teaches second grade in the Bolivar-Richburg Central School District, in Bolivar and Richburg, New York.

How has SBU's B-12 education program helped you reach personal aspirations and professional success?

Gerard: While I was at Bonaventure, we were given various internships and experiences that not only taught me how to become a better teacher, but also instilled a love of teaching in me. The program opened my eyes to new methods of teaching, and also taught me not only how to teach academics, but also how to help a child socially and emotionally.

Bonaventure had high expectations for us, but always supported us on our way to meeting them, just as we were taught we need to do for our students. The Reading Center and various

internships allowed us time to practice what we were learning in the classroom, and I am able to apply what I learned from the program in my own classroom today.

Since the age of five, I have wanted to be a teacher. St. Bonaventure taught me how to do that, and I will forever be grateful for that.

You spent a lot of time helping out in the Reading Center at SBU. How did that experience prepare you for a career?

Gerard: The Reading Center was definitely my favorite part of this program. I learned how to assess students' reading abilities, how to examine the data I gained from these assessments, and how to relay this information to parents. This allowed me to create lessons that were data-driven, and that were geared toward the students' specific needs. This is something that schools today are very focused on, and so I used this experience numerous times in interviews.

In my own classroom today, I use assessments that I used in the Reading Center to help me learn more about where my students are in their learning and what their specific needs are. I also became a much better reading teacher by practicing in the Reading Center. I learned what methods best help underperforming readers learn to read, and how to implement them. I use these methods daily in my teaching, and I am beyond grateful for this experience/program that helped me become a better teacher.

You're teaching in the middle of a pandemic right now. It's been like that for a while. How has a St. Bonaventure education helped you navigate such great challenges?

Gerard: Luckily, I have been able to teach in-person for almost the entire year (with the exception of a few weeks). However, even though we are in-person, there are still various challenges we have to overcome. One of the most important things this year is making sure that we meet our students' social and emotional needs. In both their undergrad and grad programs, St. Bonaventure taught me the importance of meeting these needs, as well as various ways to meet them, such as social justice circles, morning check-ins, and other methods.

There were a few weeks this year in which I had to teach over Zoom, and Bonaventure prepared me for that as well. When we went fully remote that semester, we began to teach our Reading Center students virtually. I learned how to use Zoom and other various online resources that I most likely would not have discovered if I had not had this experience.

This also taught me that not everything will always go as planned, as well as how to better read my students' needs in that moment, and change my teaching accordingly. This is very important, because Zoom can be a strenuous, difficult experience for students. So this experience helped me realize the importance of brain breaks, as well as how to help keep my students engaged and focused while learning through a screen.

What is your favorite part of your job? What makes it fun and rewarding to show up every day?

Gerard: I absolutely love going to work every day, so it is hard to pick just one. Every day is a different experience, and I love coming to school and seeing my students excited to learn. If I

had to choose one, I would say that my favorite part is the moment when a student achieves something that he/she could not do before. Their eyes light up, and they become so excited.

For example, I was testing one student the other day to see if she could move up a reading level and start to read harder books. I wasn't 100% sure that she would move up, and so I warned her beforehand that this book may be hard and to not become discouraged. She said OK, and started to read. She ended up reading every single word correctly! When I told her how she did, we were both so excited and you could tell from her face just how proud she was. Seeing how much she has grown since September, as well as all of my other students, makes this job so rewarding."

What are your biggest goals as an educator?

Gerard: I want to be the very best teacher that I can be, and so researching new ideas, finding ways to differentiate, and learning new ways to teach various topics are things that I do often. These are ideals that Bonaventure instilled in me, to always be researching and learning various ways to teach subjects so that I can best help my students.

I obviously want my students to be as successful as they can be academically, but I also think that it is very important to help teach them to become good people. My students are a friendly, kind bunch to begin with, but every day we talk about the importance of kindness and making sure that we treat everyone as we would want to be treated.

Every Friday we do something called "Feel Good Friday" where we sit and give one another compliments and say kind words to one another. You could not believe the compliments that they give to one another, and how excited they are to spread their kindness and love.

Therefore, while a few of my goals are to be the best teacher I can be and to help my students succeed academically, I think that helping them to be kind people is one of the most important things that I can do as an educator.

Voss on Gerard:

Gina is incredibly organized and went above and beyond for her students in her field experience and the Reading Center. Her vivacious personality, kind nature, and fair-mindedness with attention to detail make her the perfect teacher.

Gina grew so much in the course of the year of the program and it was rewarding for me to see her apply what she was learning in classes to her planning and teaching with vigor and enlightenment. When we met one on one, which is an important collaborative and personal attention component to the high quality of education the literacy program offers, Gina was always so excited to share her awakenings across lesson reflections.

I admired her ability to ask questions in order to grow. Her uptake of a mindfulness approach to teaching and learning is an embodiment that the literacy program strives for along with the mission of St. Bonaventure University.

Gina represents respect for the worth of every child, with the underpinnings of the literacy program goal to have children find confidence in themselves so that they may fall in love with

reading at the hands of a qualified and dedicated literacy teacher from the SBU literacy program. Reading is the heart of a skill needed for all of life, and Gina, along with all Bona literacy graduates, has what it takes to make a difference in the reading life of a young person.