Proficient reader: Guide dogs lead very interesting lives. For 10 or 12 years, they are in charge of guiding a blind person…

I got this recording from the U.S. Department of Education. They give a reading test every two years to a sample of kids.

Proficient reader: Most guide dogs are born at a kennel.

This is a fourth grader who did well on the test, reading a passage about guide dogs.

Proficient reader: The dogs train in large groups for about three months.

But most kids don’t do well on this test.

Below-basic reader: dogs are…

In fact, a third of fourth graders read so poorly they sound more like this:

Below-basic reader: Jod dogs l – lead very interesting lee….

This child gets through only a fraction of the passage and can’t read several words that are key to understanding what’s going on – words like “guide” and “blind.”

Below-basic reader: A bell ton…percent…

One in three kids in fourth grade reads like this. How did that happen?

(Music)
I’m Emily Hanford. I’m an education reporter. And about five years ago, I started to get really interested in why so many kids are having a hard time learning to read. And what I discovered is that in schools all over this country – and in other parts of the world too – kids are not being taught how to read.

Schools think they’re teaching kids to read. Of course they do. But it turns out there’s a big body of scientific research about reading and how kids learn to do it. This research shows there are important skills that all kids need to learn to become good readers. And in lots of schools, they aren’t being taught these skills.

Over the past few years, I produced a series of radio documentaries and articles about this. And the response was like nothing I’ve ever experienced in my career. Thousands of emails and messages and posts on social media. And there were basically two kinds of things people were saying.

The first was: I know. I know. I’ve been trying to tell people this for years.

The other response was: I had no idea. This is what I heard from lots of teachers. They had no idea they weren’t teaching kids how to read.

What I’ve been trying to figure out is – why? Why didn’t they know? Why haven’t schools been teaching children how to read? And I have an answer.

(Music)

This is Sold a Story, a podcast from American Public Media. I’ve got a lot to tell you over the next six episodes. But I’m going to tell you the answer to the question right now. Kids are not being taught how to read because for decades teachers have been sold an idea about reading and how children learn to do it. And that idea is wrong. The people who have been selling this idea – I don’t have any reason to believe they thought it was wrong. I think they wanted what I think everyone wants. They wanted kids to learn how to read. They wanted kids to love reading. But they believed so deeply in their idea about how to do that that they somehow ignored or explained away a whole lot of evidence that showed the idea was wrong. And they went on to make a lot of money.

(Music ends)

In this podcast, we’re going to focus on one publishing company and four of its top authors. They are not the only ones who’ve been selling this wrong idea about reading. But they’ve been the most successful at it. Chances are you have no idea who this company and these people
are…unless you’ve worked in an elementary school anytime in the last 20 years or so. Then, you probably know exactly who I’m talking about.

(Music)

**Lacey Robinson:** She was like a rock star walking into that building.

**Todd Collins:** If Beyoncé came and gave a private concert in my district, it would not have been a bigger deal for many of my teachers.

Their books on teaching reading became must-haves for teachers.

**Missy Purcell:** I used to call them my Bibles.

**Sherri Lucas-Hall:** Yeah, I kept it as my Bible.

**Bethany Hill:** Everything that I did was based off of their work.

A generation of teachers believed what these authors and this company were telling them.

**Christine Cronin:** They framed a picture of reading instruction that seemed beautiful. Like, softly lit rooms. Kids were gonna have cozy nooks where they were curling up with a good book. It got your heart, along with your mind.

But a key idea in their work had been disproven before some of today’s teachers were even born. A lot of teachers didn’t know that.

**Carrie Chee:** What I’m haunted by is when it wasn’t working, I blamed it on children.

**Foundas:** I mean I feel like I harmed kids, to be honest with you, because I didn’t give them what they needed.

Teachers and parents and policymakers are waking up to the fact that there’s a problem.

**Collins:** We’re all following this kind of benighted approach.

**Sarah Gannon:** How did we get into this mess?

**Collins:** Why are we doing it this way?

(Music ends)

In this podcast, we’re going to investigate where this wrong idea about reading came from. How it’s harming kids. And why a company and four of its top authors have been able to sell it for so long. I’ve been working on this story with another reporter. His name is Christopher Peak. We’ve interviewed more than 125 people. We’ve requested records from nearly 200 school districts. We scoured university archives and libraries as far away as New Zealand. We found old
videotapes – and bought a used VCR so we could watch them. We’re gonna get to that – tell you about the authors and the company and what we learned about them. But in this first episode, I’m going to tell you about how kids are being taught in classrooms where this wrong idea about reading has taken root.

Emily Hanford: OK, so we’re recording.
Corinne Adams: OK. I’m Corinne Adams. I live in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. I have two kids. Six and two. Boy and a girl.

Her son is the older one. His name is Charlie. When she sent him off to kindergarten in the fall of 2019, Corinne had no concerns. One of the reasons she and her husband had moved to South Kingstown is everyone told them the schools were great. She had no idea how her son’s school was teaching reading.

Adams: Who thinks about that? I don’t know how to teach a child how to read, so I just assumed that the children I sent to school would come back to me literate. Cause that’s what school does, right?

(Music)

At first, everything seemed fine. Charlie would come home with these little books – the same book every day for a week.

Adams: And you’d practice that book and send it back and that’s what we did.

There were directions for the parents about how to read these books with their children.

Adams: It was like read the book to the child first. And then, eventually, the child will have practiced it enough that they’ll read it and it’ll be great, you know. And he would listen to me read it, pay very close attention to what I was saying, repeat that. And if it was a new book – “Mommy, you read it to me first.”

Charlie wasn’t interested in trying to read books she hadn’t already read to him.

Adams: New books, like, freaked him out. He didn’t want to do that.

She was a little concerned maybe he was just memorizing the books. They were pretty simple stories with predictable patterns. Sentences like: “I like to play with a train. I like to play with my dog.” Charlie was able to read these books – but was he really reading? She wasn’t sure. But the school said he was doing great.
Adams: They were telling me he was doing fine. They were telling me he was on level. When Charlie did well on something in school, the teacher would send home a little note.

Adams: And he would get them all the time for like, “Great reading!” He would get them in his little backpack. And I’d be like, “Oh, you’re doing so great!”

And then, March of 2020. The pandemic.

(Music ends)

Suddenly, Corinne was in kindergarten too. Watching as Charlie and his classmates were being taught over Zoom.

Adams: So, we sit together, and I participate. You know, I help him make sure he can unmute himself and all that stuff.

Corinne’s a stay-at-home mom. She wasn’t juggling online school with another job. So she was watching pretty closely. And the reading instruction seemed kind of – odd to her.

Adams: They gave us, like, these strategies to follow.

These were things kids were supposed to do when they came to a word they didn’t know. Strategies to figure out the word. They were things like – look at the picture. Look at the first letter of the word. Think of a word that makes sense. Corinne wanted to tell Charlie to sound out the word. But handouts coming from school were telling her that wasn’t a good idea, that sounding out words should be a last resort.

Adams: So I was like, OK, well this is a new, different way. And I’m sure they understand what they’re doing. Because I do remember sounding out. I do remember that activity.

But Charlie and his classmates were being taught to use these other strategies.

Teacher: (turning page) We’re gonna look at our book, Zelda and Ivy the Runaways.

This is a video Charlie’s teacher had her students watch during Zoom school in first grade. It’s not Charlie’s teacher in the video. But it’s a lesson from the curriculum the school district was using.
**Teacher:** I’m gonna read a little bit of this story to you. And if I get stuck on a word, I want you to try to help me figure out what that word could be.

The teacher reads the story. The kids can see the words on the screen, they’re following along as she reads. And then the teacher comes to a word that she’s covered up with a little yellow sticky note.

**Teacher:** OK, so we’re gonna stop right here on this covered word.

**Adams:** And the teacher says, “What could this word be? Let’s look at the picture.”

**Teacher:** We’re gonna see if the picture helps us to figure out what that word would be.

The kids can’t see the word. It’s covered with the sticky note. So there’s no way they can sound it out. They’re just trying to figure out what the word could be based on what’s going on in the story.

**Teacher:** If we think about what’s happening so far in the story – we know Zelda and Ivy’s dad made cucumber sandwiches for lunch. And Zelda and Ivy didn’t want to eat the sandwiches, so they ran away. And now they think their mom and dad will…?

Will…what? Zelda and Ivy ran away and now they think their mom and dad will…scold them? Find them?

**Teacher:** Do you think that covered word could be the word “miss?”

Ah. Miss them.

**Teacher:** Could it be the word “miss”? Because now that they’re gone maybe their parents will miss them?

The teacher asks the kids to think about whether “miss” could be the word…using the strategies they’ve been taught.

**Teacher:** Let’s do our triple check and see. Does it make sense? Does it sound right? How about the last part of our triple check? Does it look right? Let’s uncover the word and see if it looks right?

The teacher lifts up the sticky note and indeed, the word is “miss.”
Teacher: It looks right too. Good job. Very good job. Go ahead and click on the next slide so you can practice this strategy on our next part of our story.

This seemed weird to Corinne. Why have kids guess the word? Why not have them look at the word and try to actually read it?

Adams: And I said to my son’s teacher, I was like, “This isn’t how we learned how to read,” like meaning me and her. And I just, that kept like, nagging at me, like at the back of my mind. Like, this isn’t how we did it, right? Like, this can’t be right. Right?

What made it all weirder is that the kids were actually being taught some things about how to sound out words. The teacher did some phonics lessons. But when it came to reading books, all that instruction seemed to go out the window. The books the kids were supposed to read had all kinds of words with spelling patterns they hadn’t been taught.

Adams: So, for example, they were giving him – oh, it was at Christmastime. And it was from the book *Chicken Soup with Rice*.

*Chicken Soup with Rice* is a book by Maurice Sendak that was turned into a song by Carole King.

Music: *To sip hot chicken soup with rice...*

I loved this song when I was a kid. It goes through every month of the year, January through December.

Music: *In December I will be a baubled, bangled Christmas tree.*

Adams: And it’s like, “In December I will be a baubled, bangled Christmas tree.”

Adams: And they wanted him to read that. (laughs) I just was like, how?

She knew there was no way Charlie could read “baubled” or “bangled.” Or even guess those words by using the pictures. It’s possible Corinne would have just brushed all this off: Whatever, he’ll figure it out. The school says he’s doing fine. But she also had to give Charlie a reading assessment at home. Not something a parent would normally be asked to do. But this was Covid.

Adams: And I wasn’t allowed to read it to him first. And I couldn’t help him in any way. I just, I could point to the words for him and that was it, he had to read it.
She gave him the test. They're sitting in their kitchen. Charlie's 2-year-old sister is playing in the background. And Charlie has to read a book called *How Things Move*.

**Charlie** (reading): How Things Move.

This is that reading assessment. Corinne recorded it.

**Charlie**: You. Is. My. (Charlie’s sister’s babtalk)

Here’s the sentence Charlie is trying to read: “This toy moves when you push it.” There’s a picture in the book of a girl pushing a truck.

**Charlie**: You. It. You.

Charlie is grasping for straws. He has no idea how to read most of the words in this book. Some of the words he is saying are not even on the page.

**Charlie**: …uh, box.

**Adams**: It was just like, eye-popping. And I went into my bedroom and cried. (laughs)

(Music)

And then she went to her computer and she started googling. What was this way that her kid was being taught how to read? And she found some of the articles and documentaries I had written.

**Adams**: That's when it was like a realization that: What is happening? Oh my God, what's happening?

She tried talking to some other parents.

**Adams**: And they kind of looked at me like I was insane.

Their kids were doing fine – or so they thought -- because that’s what Corinne had thought too. Then she started posting about her experience on Twitter.

**Adams**: There were parents who were like, “Oh my God.” Like, “This is my kid. This is happening to me.” Like, “This is happening to me and I’m in Chicago.” Or, “I’m in California.” Or, I’m in wherever else.
Lee Gaul: It didn’t seem like they were really teaching ‘em to read.

This is one of those parents.

Gaul: It seemed like they were teaching ‘em to sound like they could read.

I contacted this parent after I saw his posts on Twitter. His name is Lee Gaul. He lives in New York City. And in the middle of Covid – finally vaccinated – I hopped on a train from DC where I live and I met Lee on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Picking Zoe up from school: Bye Zoe, see you tomorrow! Bye Lee, see you tomorrow!

We’re picking Lee’s daughter up from school. Her name is Zoe and she’s just about to finish first grade. She goes to the public school that’s a few blocks from their apartment. The school was using the same reading curriculum that Charlie’s school was using.

Zoe: All right, I’m supposed to meet Catherine in the, in the middle circle…

Gaul: Oh. So you already got plans, that’s good.

It’s a gorgeous spring day and we’re on our way to the park around the corner from Zoe’s school. The park is full of kids and parents and nannies. The sprinklers are on, the children are running around. We’re in one of the richest Zip codes in the United States. Zoe goes to a school with a great reputation. You’d think she’d be taught how to read. But that’s not what Lee was seeing. When the pandemic hit, he lost his job. So when Zoe was at home doing Zoom school, he was there, watching everything, just like Corinne was.

Gaul: I would hear her reading. And I would hear the other kids reading.

This was the first time we talked. I was at home and he was at home, and the audio quality isn’t very good.

Gaul: They weren’t reading. They were doing what the teachers told them. And they were just guessing. I mean there’s no two ways about it. They were guessing and I just thought like – OK, well eventually they guess their way into being able to read. I’m assuming.

But it wasn’t happening for Zoe. She didn’t seem to be getting it, and she was frustrated. Lee went to the internet. He came up with the reporting I had done too. He followed the footnotes,
started reading some of the research himself. And he was shocked. Confused. Concerned. He tried to talk to the other parents at the park about what was going on with reading instruction at their school.

** Gaul:** A couple of parents were like, “Yeah, I know. I’m just so frustrated with it I can’t even deal with it.”

But for the most part, people responded to him the way they responded to Corinne.

** Gaul:** It was almost like saying I saw aliens. I saw the ship and you have to believe me. Right? Like, people were like, “Oh, yeah, OK.”

(Music)

No one wants to believe their child’s school isn’t teaching kids how to read. And a school with a great reputation on the Upper East Side of Manhattan? Lee says if he hadn’t been sitting there watching the instruction, he and his wife probably would have thought there was something wrong with Zoe. She wasn’t learning to read because she had a problem.

** Gaul:** We probably would be like, okay, what's wrong with her? Like, let's get her some help. Let's take her to, you know, uh, counselors and psychologists and hearing experts and seeing experts and figure all this stuff out.

But he didn’t think the problem was with Zoe. He didn’t think she had a reading disability. The problem was: she wasn’t being taught how to read. So, he decided to teach her himself.

More on that, after a break.

** BREAK **

(Music)

In the summer of 2021, on an unseasonably cool day for Washington, DC, I went to the Georgetown public library.

(Sound of Hanford getting out of the car)

I’m here to meet one of the children’s librarians. Her name is Ruth Fitts. She’s doing story time for preschoolers outside on a Saturday morning.
**Ruth Fitts**: Our first book was requested last week. *The Monster at the End of this Book*. Starring loveable, furry, old Grover. “Hello, everybody!”

The children are quiet and adorable, sitting on little carpet squares, wearing colorful masks to keep the virus at bay.

(Sound ends)

I came here to see Ruth Fitts because I’d been talking to a friend of hers, a former teacher who is now a private reading tutor. We were talking about the perception that it’s mostly kids from poor families who struggle to learn how to read. And she said – “Go talk to Ruth.” Because she’s a librarian in one of the richest neighborhoods in Washington and parents are coming to her all the time and asking: do you have a book I can use to teach my child to read?

**Fitts**: I’ve had so many interactions with highly educated parents who were, been told like, my child is behind and there’s all this guilt and like, what have I not done?

She says there’s a big belief out there that kids just naturally learn to read if their parents read to them enough.

**Fitts**: When you ask them what has the child been learning at school, a lot of it is just, practice reading. No instruction in how to read. We’re just gonna practice and you’re just gonna figure it out.

Some kids do figure it out. They don’t need much instruction. But a whole bunch of research shows this is not actually true for most kids. They need to be taught how to read. It doesn’t happen naturally through exposure to books. Ruth says it comes as a shock to a lot of families when they realize schools aren’t teaching their kids how to read. Suddenly, they realize they have to teach their kids themselves. Or hire a tutor. Which she says a lot of them do. But not everyone has the money to hire a tutor or the time to do the teaching themselves. And what you heard about the way Charlie and Zoe were being taught – that can actually harm kids. Those word-reading strategies can create bad habits that are really hard to break.

**Kenni Alden**: He doesn’t look at all the letters in words. He doesn’t look at all the words in sentences. And reading is miserable for him.

This is Kenni Alden. She lives in California. She was in her car when we talked, waiting for her kids who were at soccer practice. She has two boys who were 12 and 14 at the time. It’s her younger one she’s worried about.
Alden: He omits words. He adds words. He’ll substitute a word that makes sense in the context, that has a few of the same letters as the actual word, and just cruise right on.

She gives an example. He was reading out loud and the word was “irrepressible.” But he said “irresponsible.”

Alden: And I’ve got so many examples like that. Just the other day, the word was “misguided” and he said “misjudged.” He said “effective” when it says “efficient.” I could give examples from now until forever.

These kinds of mistakes can really get in the way when it comes to understanding what you read. A middle school teacher gave me the example of a kid who thought that in 1939 Poland invited the Germans into their country. That’s a lot different from what really happened. The Germans invaded Poland.

Alden: What’s going on with my son is that he was made to feel successful by not looking at all the letters in the words.

He learned those strategies. Things like – look at the first letter, use the picture, think of a word that makes sense. That’s what he was taught. And that’s what he did.

Alden: And so that habit of not looking at the words just continued on.

(Music)

Alden: He got further and further behind as a reader and writer. And he kept doing the same thing until we are where we are now.

He’s a kid who doesn’t like reading and doesn’t like school. He’s not failing. Kenni says he does OK. His test scores are actually pretty good. But he can’t spell. He does everything in his power to avoid reading and writing. The idea of him going to high school makes Kenni really anxious.

As we’re talking, she’s looking out the window of her car, toward the field where her kids are playing soccer. She’s full of regret. Because she knew something was wrong when her son was little. She knew.

Alden: I always knew it was a problem. And maybe there was a time when I should have just stopped everything. Just, I don’t know, taken a leave of absence from work or something, and just fixed it. But I didn’t.
She and her son’s other mom thought about sending him to a different school. But all the public schools where they live in Berkeley, California taught reading the same way. There was no getting away from it. She was just kind of hoping it would all work out. And it didn’t. He stuck with the strategies he was taught. And he never learned how to read very well.

(Music transitions to sound)

**Gaul**: So Zo, why don’t you come over here for a second? Let’s look at the -sion stuff that we did before…

I’m back with Lee and Zoe on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Lee is showing me some of the materials he used to teach Zoe how to read.

**Gaul**: So this is -sion. And we did -tion before. So, like, look at this word, what is this word?

**Zoe**: Aaa – addition?

**Gaul**: Yeah, that’s right. Um, what is this word?

We’re in their apartment. It’s a tiny one-bedroom. When Lee decided he was gonna teach Zoe to read, he scoured the internet for resources, taught her some things about how to sound out words, and got what are known as “decodable” books.

**Gaul**: Do you remember what it felt like the first time we read a decodable book?

**Zoe**: Yeah, it was kind of hard.

**Gaul**: Yeah.

A decodable is a book with words that have spelling patterns a child has been taught. So she can try to read the words. She doesn’t have to guess them.

**Gaul**: And we started reading that book. You – I said, “Hey, I have a decodable book. I want you to read it. Let’s try reading it.” And you’re like “OK, OK,” and we started reading it. And I had to stop you after 54 pages. Cause you read 54 pages of it. Remember that?

**Zoe**: (mumbles)

**Gaul**: Yeah. I think both of us were kind of blown away, right?

**Zoe** (whispering): It was like the best. Thing. Ever.

**Gaul**: Yeah, it was so fun to read it, wasn’t it?

**Zoe**: Yeah.

**Gaul**: Yeah.

**Hanford**: Do you have any books you can read to me now? What are you reading?
Zoe: I’m reading *The Zombie Diaries*. They’re really fun.
Hanford: Will you read a little bit to me? How do you feel about that?
Zoe: Yeah.
Gaul: Do you want to go grab it really quick?
Zoe: Yeah.
Gaul: OK.
Zoe: Stay.
Gaul: I’ll stay here. I’m just getting up so you can get by.

Zoe scooches past her dad, across their apartment to her bedroom. And then she’s back with her book.

Zoe: (pages turning) This is book one and book two ...

And she starts reading.

Zoe: (pages turning) I decided to walk…Skelee to school today. One thing about Skelee is that she really – wait, Skelee, whatever, ok – really likes to talk…

Zoe is still learning. But at the end of first grade, she’s clearly on her way to becoming a good reader. Kids who are not on this path by the end of first grade rarely catch up. And that’s because of this thing that’s been dubbed the Matthew Effect. It’s a biblical reference. Basically, when it comes to reading, the rich get richer. If you get off to a good start, you tend to like reading more, you tend to do it more. And the more you read, the better you get at reading. But the opposite can happen. You don’t get off to a good start. Reading is confusing and frustrating and you don’t really like it. Zoe didn’t get off to a good start with reading – and then her dad swooped in and changed that.

Zoe: Squide. Squid? Squid. (Music)

Zoe was lucky. And Charlie was too. Because his mom Corinne did exactly what Lee did. After that disastrous reading assessment when she realized Charlie had no idea how to read the words, she decided to teach him herself. She went to the internet. She bought books. And he learned pretty easily. Which tells you that Charlie wasn’t struggling because he has a reading disability. He was struggling because he wasn’t being taught. Just like Zoe.

Gaul: I shudder to think what would be if I hadn’t been home all this time and seeing it, you know.
It’s possible Zoe would have been fine – and Charlie too – if their parents hadn’t intervened. Some kids do eventually put it all together. They don’t need much instruction. But sixty-five percent of fourth graders in this country are not proficient readers according to that test I told you about at the beginning of the episode. Scores on that test have been terrible for decades. And the problem is even worse when you look beyond the average and focus on specific groups of children. The most alarming statistic: eighty-two percent of Black fourth graders are not proficient readers. That’s more than 8 in 10 Black children.

Adams: I think a lot of people just expect that some kids will never read.

What Corinne Adams just said – lots of people have said this to me. Reading scores have been so low for so long that many people have come to accept that this is just the way things are. Not something schools can do much about. Corinne Adams says what she’s learned over the past couple of years is that if you want to make sure your children can read, you should teach them yourself.

Adams: That’s like such a messed-up way to have a public school system in this country. Public school should be like this sacred trust. I’m going to give you my child and you’re gonna teach him how to read. And that shattered for me. That was broken.

She drafted an email about all this to the principal of her son’s school. But she didn’t end up sending it because…she likes the school, she likes the teachers. She doesn’t want to be the problem parent telling them they’re doing something wrong. And she doesn’t really think this is their fault.

Adams: Like, I really don’t blame teachers. (Music)

Teachers all over this country think they’re doing the right thing. They’re teaching reading the way their curriculum and materials tell them to. And the people who are selling those materials are trusted. Revered. Considered the nation’s top experts when it comes to teaching reading. Not everything those experts are promoting is wrong. But something is. One really important idea about how kids learn to read.

In the next episode, I’m gonna tell you about this idea…where it came from and what’s wrong with it.

Sold a Story is a podcast from American Public Media. It’s reported and produced by me, Emily Hanford, with Christopher Peak. Our editor is Catherine Winter. Digital editors are Dave Mann and Andy Kruse. Mixing and sound design by Chris Julin and Emily Haavik. We had reporting and production help from Angela Caputo, Will Callan and Chole Marie Rivera and fact-checking
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The final mix of this episode was by Derek Ramirez.

We have five more episodes coming. You’ll be able to find them all on our website – SoldaStory.org. You can find links to all of our previous articles and documentaries about reading at that website too. Again, it’s SoldaStory.org.

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