

Sold a Story: Discussion Guide

This guide provides points for discussion as educators, parents, community members and students listen to *Sold a Story* from APM Reports.

For each episode, there are questions for before, during and after listening, as well as suggested readings and activities to extend the conversation.

As you listen to each episode, think about:

- What moments and ideas in this episode stood out to you? Why?
- What challenged you? What surprised you? Why?
- What in this episode resonated with your own experience?
- What questions do you have?

Episode 1: The Problem Corinne Adams watches her son's lessons during Zoom school and discovers a dismaying truth: He can't read. Little Charlie isn't the only one. Sixty-five percent of fourth graders in the United States are not proficient readers. Kids need to learn specific skills to become good readers, and in many schools, those skills are not being taught.  EPISODE 1		
Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
32:47	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/10/20/sold-a-story-e1-the-problem	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	An excerpt of the lesson Charlie and his classmates watched during Zoom school: Readers Think about What Kind of Word Would Fit, from Units of Study for Teaching Reading Parents are Watching Like Never Before	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Problem”	
Before Listening	• What thoughts come to mind as you read the episode description? • What percentage of students in your school district are not proficient readers?
While Listening	• What causes the parents in this episode to question the instruction their children are getting in school?
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i>

Corinne didn't tell the school about her concerns with Charlie's reading instruction:

"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."

- Have parents come to you with concerns about reading instruction? How have you responded to their concerns?
- Do you know if your students have received help with reading outside of school?

The strategies you hear children being taught in this episode are grounded in a theory of reading that will be explored throughout the podcast. In this episode we hear:

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."

- Are these strategies familiar to you? Are you aware of the theory they are based on?

Corrine says:

"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."

- As a teacher, there are many things you are expected to do. Where does teaching reading fit into your school's list of priorities?

From a parenting perspective:

Lee Gaul says if he hadn't been watching the instruction on Zoom, he and his wife probably would have thought that their daughter, Zoe, had a reading disability.

- Have you had concerns about your child's reading?
 - Did you think that their difficulties might be connected to the way they were taught? Why or why not?
 - Did you tell anyone at the school about your concerns? How did that go?

From a community perspective:

When Lee approached other parents at Zoe's school with his concerns about the reading instruction, many of them responded with disbelief. Lee says:

"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.'"

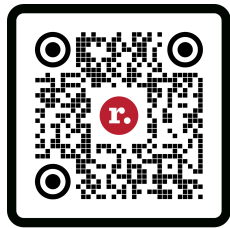
- Why do you think people responded this way?

Near the end of the episode, Corinne says:

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

	- Do you think this is true? Why? <i>From a student perspective:</i> - Did Charlie and Zoe’s reading instruction sound familiar to you? - How were you taught to read? Zoe’s dad got her a “decodable” book and she says reading it was “hard.” She also says that it was “the best thing ever.” - Do you remember when you first learned how to read? How did it feel?
Wrap Up	What is “The Problem” detailed in this episode?
Extend	Activity 1 Kenni Alden describes her son’s reading: “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. 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. ... He got further and further behind as a reader and writer.” Read an excerpt from the materials that go with the lesson Charlie and his classmates watched during Zoom school. - How are students being taught to read the words in that lesson? - How might this result in a child reading the way that Kenni’s son does?  EXCERPT  VIDEO Activity 2 Read this article by the CEO of the Baltimore City Public Schools, Sonja Santelises. She writes: “COVID-19 has blown the doors off our schools and the walls off our classrooms. It has Zoomed educators into homes and parents into classrooms, providing the transparency that parents have long deserved. Watching their children engage in remote learning, Zooming from one class to the next, parents note the differences across classrooms — differences we in education have long noted but have too often sought to minimize when trying to allay parents’ concerns. That worrisome thing parents couldn’t quite put their finger on — they can see it now ... That simple, ‘trust us’ is not going to fly anymore.” - How would you describe your trust in schools? Has anything changed? Why? Activity 3  ARTICLE

	Develop a survey to find out if, how and why families in your school or district are providing additional reading instruction outside of school. Consider how you can use what you find to inform discussions about how reading is taught in classrooms.
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Episode 2: The Idea Sixty years ago, Marie Clay developed a way to teach reading she said would help kids who were falling behind. They'd catch up and never need help again. Today, her program remains popular and her theory about how people read is at the root of a lot of reading instruction in schools. But Marie Clay was wrong.		
 EPISODE 2		
Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
51:41	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/10/20/sold-a-story-e2-the-idea	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	The three-cueing system in reading: Will it ever go away? Brain Builders Videos: The Science of Reading for Kids	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Idea”	
Before Listening	Read the episode description. What do you know about Marie Clay?
While Listening	Why do you think the episode begins and ends with Dan Corcoran’s story?
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> Clay said this about the books used in a Reading Recovery lesson: “The easy text gives the child a chance to practice all the reading strategies that they’ve learnt so far. To put some of the complicated behaviors together which I sometimes call ‘orchestrating’ the reading behavior. To do fluent reading right from the very beginning.” Clay wanted students to sound like fluent readers from the beginning. What did you learn in this episode about how people become skilled readers? <i>From a parenting perspective:</i> Clay did not expect the scientific breakthroughs that have since revealed how skilled reading develops. She said: “We don’t know what’s going on behind the eyes in these particular areas. And they’re also saying, as far as I can see, it’s unlikely we will ever know. So that will remain magic and all we

	can do in these situations is to arrange good situations for children to respond to and then just guide their responding. They have to do the learning." • What did you believe about how children learn to read before you started listening to this podcast? • Have your ideas changed? How? Why? <i>From a community perspective:</i> Clay said, in 1967: "We have a school system which allows the good readers to get better and the poor readers to drop further and further behind." • Has that changed? Why or why not? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • What did you learn in this episode about how people learn to read? Here are videos you can watch to learn more. We especially recommend Episode 4: The Origin of My Reading Brain.
Wrap Up	• This entire podcast explores one idea about reading. The idea is described in this episode. What is the idea?
Extend	<i>Activity 1</i> Compare the research methods Clay used to the methods Bruce McCandliss used. • How do you think their methods influenced their different understandings of how reading works? <i>Activity 2</i> In the article The three-cueing system in reading: Will it ever go away?, Kerry Hempenstall writes: "One might think that after the publication of numerous authoritative reports on skilled reading and how to promote it (such as that of the National Reading Panel, 2000), this tired hypothesis would have been long ago assigned to the history folder. However, a cursory search for the 3 cueing term produces many examples of it being endorsed by school districts, education departments, teacher training institutions, and school documents." • Why do you think the cueing system has had such staying power? <i>Activity 3</i>  ARTICLE

	Listen to your child read and notice how they approach unfamiliar words. Do you have concerns? Talk with other parents in your school to see what they have noticed about their children's reading.
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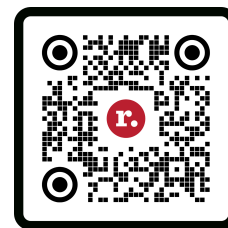
Episode 3: The Battle President George W. Bush made improving reading instruction a priority. He got Congress to provide money to schools that used reading programs supported by scientific research. But backers of Marie Clay's cueing idea saw Bush's Reading First initiative as a threat.  EPISODE 3		
Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
41:09	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/10/27/sold-a-story-e3-the-battle	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	New reading laws sweep the nation following Sold a Story “Premortem” activity (from Page 6 of Lessons Learned? Reading Wars, Reading First, and a Way Forward)	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Battle”	
Before Listening	What do you know about Reading First and what it was trying to accomplish?
While Listening	Who knew what about the problems with cueing? When did they know?
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> - What obstacles did Reading First face? - Has your perspective on Reading First changed after hearing this episode? In what ways? <i>From a parenting perspective:</i> - How would you like your child to be taught to read? Picture what you want and write down some words that come to mind. As you continue listening to <i>Sold a Story</i>, notice if your thinking changes. (We will revisit these words in the

	discussion about the next episode.) <i>From a community perspective:</i> • What role should the federal government have in how schools teach reading? • How can the story of Reading First be used to inform future initiatives? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • What did you think about the idea that only some kids need “word work”? • Were you in guided reading groups? What do you remember about guided reading?
Wrap Up	• Why was there a battle over cueing?
Extend	Activity 1 • How does your state approach reading instruction? You might consider starting your research with this article: New reading laws sweep the nation following <i>Sold a Story</i> • Has there been any new legislation in your state regarding reading instruction? ○ What do the laws say? ○ Do you think these laws will help improve instruction? Why or why not? Activity 2 Consider the “premortem” activity (which comes from Page 6 of Lessons Learned? Reading Wars, Reading First, and a Way Forward) • How could a premortem help refine or improve a reading initiative proposed in your school, district or state? Organize a premortem for the stakeholders who are planning a reading initiative at your school or district. Before completing a premortem for an actual initiative, it may be helpful to familiarize participants with the process by doing a practice round. Margaret Goldberg wrote these scripts to facilitate role-playing and you may find them helpful if you want to do the same.  ARTICLE  PREMORTEM  EXCERPT  SCRIPTS

Episode 4: The Superstar

Teachers sing songs about Lucy Calkins. The longtime professor at Columbia University's Teachers College is one of the most influential people in American elementary education today. Her admirers call her books bibles. Why didn't she know that scientific research contradicted reading strategies she promoted?



EPISODE 4

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
33:18	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/11/03/sold-a-story-e4-the-superstar	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	Using Research and Reason in Education	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Superstar”

Before Listening	Episode 3 ended with people talking about a superstar. “She was like a rock star walking into that building. And it was like theater.” “If Beyoncé came and gave a private concert in my district, it would not have been a bigger deal for many of my teachers.” “It felt like you were watching something magical.” • Did you know who they were describing? What do you know about Lucy Calkins?
While Listening	• What do you learn about Lacey Robinson? Are you surprised that she was drawn to Lucy Calkins’ approach to teaching reading?
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> In this episode, we hear teachers talk about how motivated they were to learn how to teach children to read and write. Lisa Karim: “Everybody was whisper-quiet and there was Lucy, down at the front, with a student, teaching a writing lesson. And it felt like you were watching something magical.” Emily Hanford: “Lisa Karim wanted to make the same kind of magic for her students. That’s why she was there.” Karim: “It was — here’s a person who knows how children learn to read and write. And I want to be able to teach children to read and write.”

	• How much did you know about how kids learn to read when you started teaching? • What motivates you to learn more as a teacher? <i>From a parenting perspective:</i> Emily says this: “Lucy Calkins had an idea about how children learn. And I think that idea was influenced by privilege. Her idea was kind of romantic. That learning is fun and beautiful. That it’s a natural process. Kind of magical. And that a teacher’s job is to unlock a child’s potential. To observe and nurture. To help children fall in love with reading and writing. “I think I used to believe this too. That learning to read was a natural process. That if you read enough to your kids, they’d learn. And I think my belief was influenced by privilege. I grew up in a family not unlike Lucy Calkins’ family. Upper middle class, white, well-educated — both of my parents went to Teachers College Columbia in the 1960s. I even had some monogrammed bath towels. “And as I mentioned in an earlier episode, I think learning to read was pretty easy for me. And it was pretty easy for my kids. Nothing challenged my view that learning to read is a natural process. Until I began doing this reporting a few years ago.” Look at what you wrote during the discussion of Episode 3. • How has your background and life experience influenced the kind of reading instruction you want for your child? Lacey says: “Everybody don’t have to love to read and write. But everybody has a right to learn to read and write.” • When you heard her say this, what did you think? <i>From a community perspective:</i> Lacey says: “I thought I was playing Robin Hood.” • What did she mean by that? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • Does your school do the reading and writing workshop? ○ What do you like about it? What don’t you like?
Wrap Up	• What was Calkins’ idea about how kids learn to read? Where did it come from, and how did she help spread that idea?
Extend	<i>Activity 1</i> In this 2003 article, Using Research and Reason in Education, Paula and Keith Stanovich wrote:

“Education is so susceptible to fads and unproven practices because of its tacit endorsement of a personalistic view of knowledge acquisition — one that is antithetical to the scientific value of the public verifiability of knowledge claims.

“Many educators believe that knowledge resides within particular individuals — with particularly elite insights — who then must be called upon to dispense this knowledge to others. Indeed, some educators reject public, depersonalized knowledge in social science because they believe it dehumanizes people.

“Science, however, with its conception of publicly verifiable knowledge, actually democratizes knowledge. It frees practitioners and researchers from slavish dependence on authority.”

- Do you agree that education is susceptible to “fads and unproven practices”? Why or why not?

Activity 2

Go to your school district’s website and see if you can determine how your child’s school teaches reading.

- Can you identify the curriculum used, who provides teacher training, and the reading strategies children are taught?

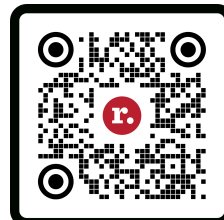
Emily and Margaret have both written articles for parents you might want to read:

[Is my child’s school getting reading right? What to ask. What to look for](#) by Margaret Goldberg

[What to do if your child's school isn't teaching reading right](#) by Emily Hanford



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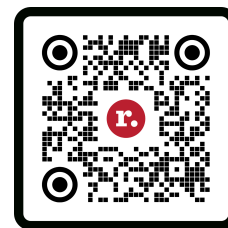
MARGARET



EMILY

Episode 5: The Company

Teachers call books published by Heinemann their bibles. The company's products are in schools all over the country. Some of the products used to teach reading are rooted in a debunked idea about how children learn to read. But they've made the company and some of its authors millions.



EPISODE 5

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
47:22	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/11/10/sold-a-story-e5-the-company	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	Video of Calkins introducing the Units of Study program	

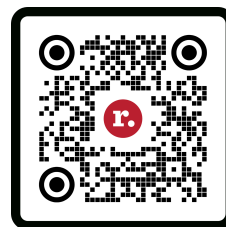
Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Company”

Before Listening	What thoughts come to mind as you read the episode description?
While Listening	There are a lot of numbers, dates and dollar amounts in this episode. Consider making note of them while you listen.
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> In this episode, you heard: Emily Hanford: “Heinemann books didn’t need that much marketing.” Temple Ireland-Rosenberger: "I would call it social media before there was social media. Right? Like it was, the social media was in the school. It was, I’m gonna pass you my book, I’m gonna pass you this thing. ” - How do ideas spread in education today? - How are those ideas being vetted (or not)? Learning that Gay Su Pinnell bought a Maserati caused a stir among some listeners of <i>Sold a Story</i>. - Did it seem unfair to include that detail? Why or why not? - Were you surprised to hear about the money that has been made by Heinemann and its authors? - What other dollar amounts, dates and numbers caught your attention and why?

	<i>From a parenting perspective:</i> Matt Burns says that reading levels are unreliable: “I give the kid the test one day, it’s a G. The next day it’s an I. The next day it’s an E. The next day it’s an F.” • Does your child’s school use a leveled reading system? • What information do you get about your child’s reading ability? <i>From a community perspective:</i> In this episode, you heard about the lack of evidence to support the Fountas & Pinnell leveling system and you also heard about a big study that raised questions about the effectiveness of Reading Recovery. • What do you want schools to do with this information? Missy Purcell says she wants Calkins, Fountas & Pinnell and Heinemann to be “held accountable.” • Do you agree? If so, what would that mean? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • What surprised you most in this episode? • Does your school use leveled books? ◦ Do you think your level reflects your reading ability? Why or why not?
Wrap Up	• What are some reasons reading research hasn’t had much impact on how schools teach reading?
Extend	<i>Activity 1</i> Watch this video of Lucy Calkins describing the Units of Study program and write down the claims she made about her program. • What process does your school district go through to vet programs? <i>Activity 2</i> • If your school uses leveled books, what will you do with them now that you’ve heard this episode? If you are looking for ideas, consider reading some lessons that Margaret wrote.  VIDEO  LESSONS

Episode 6: The Reckoning

Lucy Calkins says she has learned from the science of reading. She's revised her materials. Fountas and Pinnell have not revised theirs. Their publisher, Heinemann, is still selling some products to teach reading that contain debunked practices. Parents, teachers and lawmakers want answers.



EPISODE 6

Episode Length	Link to Episode	Link to Transcript
41:40	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/11/17/sold-a-story-e6-the-reckoning	Printable transcript
Additional Materials	Calkins' statement: No One Gets to Own the Term "The Science of Reading" Some of the responses: - Cognitive scientist, Mark Seidenberg - Professor who specializes in multilingual learners, Claude Goldenberg - Teacher, Margaret's response - Group of parents in Wisconsin Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study	

Questions and Topics for Discussing "The Reckoning"

Before Listening	• What questions do you have for Calkins, Fountas & Pinnell and Heinemann?
While Listening	Many questions are asked in this episode — by parents, teachers and Emily. Write down the questions you hear and whether they are answered.
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> In her statement No One Gets to Own the Term "The Science of Reading," Calkins rebuked people who questioned her approach. But she later says to Emily: "I think it's really been learning from you and other science of reading researchers — the importance of orthographic mapping and being convinced as we worked with teachers and in classrooms, you know, being convinced that that was something that we could benefit from changing on that account."

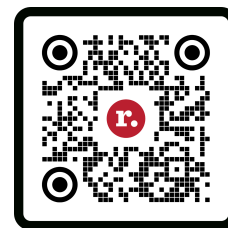
	• What did you think about the science of reading when you first heard about it? • What do you think about it now? What’s changed and why? Emily describes a moment at the Reading Recovery Conference in 2018 when she realized something: “The people in this room have bought into a definition of reading that isn’t really reading. They’ve bought the idea that reading is making meaning from a story using whatever strategies you can think of. You can look at the pictures, you can look at parts of the words, you can think about what would make sense. “They’ve bought into the cueing idea. The idea that a child can read a book without being able to read the words.” • Did you believe in the cueing idea? Has your thinking changed? <i>From a parenting perspective:</i> • Do you know how students are taught to read in your school district? • Has there been any discussion about reading? What are people talking about? <i>From a community perspective:</i> • What has been the response in your community to <i>Sold a Story</i>? • Are you planning to take any action? What will you do? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • Have you been talking to people about the podcast? ◦ Who have you been talking to and what have you been talking about?
Wrap Up	• Were your questions answered?
Extend	Activity 1 Read the statement from Calkins, No One Gets to Own the Term “The Science of Reading” and some of the responses, such as: - Cognitive scientist, Mark Seidenberg - Professor who specializes in multilingual learners, Claude Goldenberg - Teacher, Margaret’s response - Group of parents in Wisconsin As you read each response, highlight key words and phrases that illuminate concerns the authors have about Calkins and  CALKINS  SEIDENBERG  GOLDENBERG  MARGARET  PARENTS

	her approach. Activity 2 <i>Sold a Story</i> focuses on how children are being taught to read words. This is just one element of reading instruction. Review Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study and discuss additional components of reading instruction that warrant attention. Activity 3 Parents: Write down what you want from your child’s reading instruction after listening to <i>Sold a Story</i>. Now compare that to what you wrote in the discussion of Episode 3. • Has anything changed? Why?	 REPORT
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Concluding questions	
Now that you’ve listened to <i>Sold a Story</i>	Below are the episode titles: - The Problem - The Idea - The Battle - The Superstar - The Company - The Reckoning • Using the titles, how would you summarize the argument the podcast made? • What was the purpose of <i>Sold a Story</i>? • What are you going to keep thinking about?

Episode 11: The Outlier

There's a school district in eastern Ohio where virtually all the students become good readers by the time they finish third grade. Many of the wealthiest places in the country can't even say that. And Steubenville is a Rust Belt town where the state considers almost all the students "economically disadvantaged." How did they do it?



EPISODE 11

Episode Length	Listen to the episode	Read the transcript
32:29	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2025/02/20/sold-a-story-e11-the-outlier	Printable Transcript
Additional Materials	• APM Reports — Most school districts have lots of kids who struggle with reading. This one is different • American Educator — Catch Them Before They Fall • Timothy Shanahan — Letter names or sounds first?	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Outlier”

Before Listening	• What do you think makes some schools more successful than others? What are your criteria for a successful school?
While Listening	• What specific practices help Steubenville students become successful readers?
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> This episode describes practices that Steubenville uses to teach reading, but it does not provide the name of the program they use. • How might discussing practices rather than programs change conversations among teachers? • How did listening to a description of successful reading practices without a program name affect your listening? In Steubenville, the staff has agreed on a consistent way to teach foundational skills, from classroom to classroom and grade to grade. • What steps would be needed to create consistency in reading instruction across all classrooms in your school? • How could doing so help your students?

Steubenville provides tutoring during the school day.

“In fact, every first grader at this school gets a reading tutor until they've mastered all the first grade material. And as kids reach mastery and their tutors are freed up, the first graders who are still behind get even more tutoring ... probably 25, sometimes 40, minutes. Sometimes twice a day, four days a week.”

- How does this compare to your school's approach to helping students who need support?
 - How are students identified for additional support?
 - Who teaches them? What are they taught?

From a parenting perspective:

Consider Steubenville’s focus on attendance:

“Attendance is huge. A school can offer fantastic reading instruction. But kids aren't going to get that instruction if they're not in school. So Steubenville puts a lot of effort into making sure kids show up.”

Suzanne Allen describes what she does to promote attendance:

Allen: “So when I receive the attendance cards from the teachers, if a parent hasn't called, I make sure that I give them a call.”

Emily Hanford: “If he doesn't show up on Monday, she says she'll drive to the homeless shelter and find out what's going on. She does this a lot — knocks on doors, brings kids to school if she has to.”

- What does your child’s school do to promote attendance?
- In the past, how have you determined whether or not your child will attend school on any given day? Does hearing about Steubenville’s approach and success make you think about those decisions differently?

Students in need of reading tutoring receive it during the school day in Steubenville.

- How does this approach compare to the support available at your child's school?
- Has your child received tutoring? What was that experience like?

From a community perspective:

Steubenville helps meet students’ basic needs — providing clothing, helping them with their hair, and even visiting their homes to check on attendance.

- What kinds of support are available for students in need at your school?
- Should schools make it a priority to offer this kind of help? Why or why not?

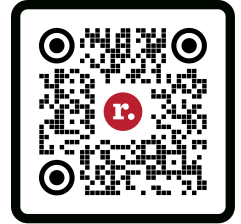
From a student perspective:

- In what ways did the classrooms in Steubenville sound similar or different from your school?
- What do you think about cooperative learning, where students teach each other? Do you do that at your school?

Wrap Up	What would it take for your school to become an outlier like Steubenville?
Extend	<i>Activity 1</i> Read Catch Them Before They Fall, which includes the following quote: “The best solution to the problem of reading failure is to allocate resources for early identification and prevention. It is a tragedy of the first order that while we know clearly the costs of waiting too long, few school districts have in place a mechanism to identify and help children before failure takes hold.” - What’s in place in your school district to identify students at risk of reading difficulty? - What resources are allocated to support these students? - What kind of help is available for older students? <i>Activity 2</i> Steubenville uses a “sounds first” approach to teaching letters, but: “There’s actually some disagreement among cognitive scientists about whether it’s better to start with the letter names or the letter sounds. The bottom line is that kids need to learn both.” Read Letter names or sounds first? - What surprised you about the research findings regarding teaching letter names versus letter sounds? - What does this example tell you about how complex teaching something "simple" actually is? - How does this article help you understand why different schools might approach early literacy differently? - Do you know if the students entering kindergarten near you tend to know letter names? Sounds? Do they already know how to read? Shanahan acknowledges that his final recommendation is “an opinion rather than a data-based, science of reading claim.” - What does this suggest about the relationship between research and classroom practice?  ARTICLE  ARTICLE

Episode 12: The Evidence

There's a name for the program at the heart of Steubenville's remarkable reading results. It's called Success for All. It's been around for decades, and numerous studies have shown it's effective. But relatively few school districts use it. We trace the history of the program and why it's never really caught on.



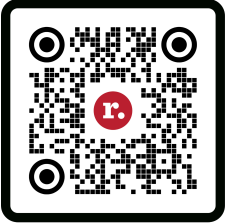
EPISODE 12

Episode Length	Listen to the Episode	Read the Transcript
34:31	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2025/02/27/sold-a-story-e12-the-evidence	Printable Transcript
Additional Materials	- APM Reports — Success for All gets kids reading. Why don't more schools use it? - Vanderbilt — What is an evidence-based practice or program? - Success for All — Research summary - Right to Read Project — A Classroom Teachers' Guide to Reading Research	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Evidence”

Before Listening	Read the episode description. - What do you know about Success for All? - What do you think it means for a program or practice to be “evidence-based”? Write down your definition.
While Listening	- Take note of how the terms “evidence” and “scientifically based” are used and defined. (in particular, the section from 18:00 to 25:00) - Why did Bob Slavin call for an end to Reading First? (20:30 to 24:55) - Why did Heinemann and its star authors flourish after Reading First? (27:15 to 28:30)
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> The episode described how researchers relied on different approaches to understand and address reading difficulties. Compare the way Marie Clay developed Reading Recovery with the way Bob Slavin and Nancy Madden created Success for All: “[Marie Clay] observed children and came up with a theory — an idea — about how they learn. She built her program based on that idea. But then a lot of cognitive science research came along that showed her idea was wrong. “Bob Slavin and Nancy Madden took a different approach. They didn't start with an idea about how kids learn to read. They started with a collection of practices, backed by rigorous research.

	Practices like phonics instruction that had already been studied and shown to work.” • Which approach is more familiar to you? Do you remember what you were taught in your teacher preparation program? • When you encounter a new program or practice, how do you determine whether you want to use it? Do you look for research evidence, or do you rely on other factors to determine whether it’s worth implementing? <i>From a parenting perspective:</i> Nancy Madden says: “You may be worrying about high school, but if those kids aren't reading by third grade, then you've lost them. You have to do that early part really well.” • Does this perspective align with how you’ve thought about your child’s education? • Success for All is a highly structured, scripted program. Would you want your child to attend a school that uses a program like that? Why or why not? <i>From a community perspective:</i> The Reading First initiative collapsed amid controversy over conflicts of interest and program promotion. Bob Slavin wrote in his complaint that the “Reading First legislation itself is sound, well-intentioned.” “But Slavin said Reading First had strayed from its intended purpose. That it was not promoting ‘scientifically based reading research.’ That it had become, instead, a giant giveaway to publishers who were making millions of dollars on programs that hadn't been tested or proven.” • What lessons from Reading First could help inform reading instruction changes going on now in your state or district? What can be done so that education policies don't become “giveaways to publishers”? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • Nancy Madden and Bob Slavin were looking for things that schools could do differently to help kids succeed. What could your school do differently to help you or your classmates? • What do you think about the idea that your school can make a real difference in whether you succeed?		
Wrap Up	Look back at your definition of “evidence-based.” Now review the chart below: <table><tr><td>Evidence-based program or practice</td><td>Directly tested in rigorous studies (e.g., randomized controlled trials, strong quasi-experimental studies) and has shown positive results</td></tr></table>	Evidence-based program or practice	Directly tested in rigorous studies (e.g., randomized controlled trials, strong quasi-experimental studies) and has shown positive results
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	<table border="1" data-bbox="370 111 1458 436"><tr><td data-bbox="370 111 727 289">Research-based program or practice</td><td data-bbox="727 111 1458 289">Built on principles, theories or strategies that are supported by research, but the program or practice itself has not been directly tested</td></tr><tr><td data-bbox="370 289 727 436">Emerging program or practice</td><td data-bbox="727 289 1458 436">Anecdotal evidence of effectiveness but research has not been conducted</td></tr></table> Check your understanding by explaining to the person next to you or jotting a quick note: • What is the difference between an “evidence-based” and a “research-based” program or practice? • Is your school using “evidence-based” programs and practices? How do you know? • There isn’t an evidence-based program or practice for every instructional need. Can you think of some examples? What do you do in that case?	Research-based program or practice	Built on principles, theories or strategies that are supported by research, but the program or practice itself has not been directly tested	Emerging program or practice	Anecdotal evidence of effectiveness but research has not been conducted
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Extend	Activity 1 Read A Classroom Teachers’ Guide to Reading Research • What terms or explanations were new to you? Here’s a way to remember the difference between “efficacy” and “effectiveness”: • Efficacy = Can it work? (best-case scenario) • Effectiveness = Does it work? (real-world scenario) Now think about your school. • Why might a program that has been proven in a study turn out not to work at your school? What could you do to increase the chances that the program would work? Activity 2 Read Success for All gets kids reading. Why don’t more schools use it? • Why do schools drop Success for All? • Would a program like Success for All work in your school or district? Why or why not?  ARTICLE  ARTICLE				

Episode 13: The List

Steubenville became a model of reading success. Then a new law in Ohio put it all at risk. In this episode, we look at the science of reading lists some states are making, why the program Steubenville has been using for 25 years isn't getting on many of these lists, and the surprising power of one curriculum review group.



EPISODE 13

Episode Length	Listen to the Episode	Read the Transcript
35:22	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2025/03/06/sold-a-story-e13-the-list	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	- APM Reports — New reading laws sweep the nation following Sold a Story - APM Reports — When schools buy new reading programs, they look to EdReports. But some of its reviews don't line up with science - Right to Read Project — The Standards Trap: Why Grade-Level Teaching Fails Our Students	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The List”

Before Listening	- Who should decide what reading programs schools use? Why? - Are you familiar with the policies in your state regarding curriculum? What role should state governments play in curriculum decisions?
While Listening	- Why wasn't Success for All initially on Ohio's list? (2:15 to 4:05) - What is EdReports, and how did it become so influential? (4:05 to 7:50)
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> The episode explains that EdReports was designed around Common Core standards, not the science of reading: Christopher Peak: “The Common Core standards basically lay out what kids should know and be able to do at each grade level. ... But the Common Core standards don't say anything about how to do that. They don't say anything about how to teach.” Emily Hanford: “EdReports was basically agnostic on how things were taught. What EdReports essentially wanted to see was that a curriculum was covering everything in that 66-page standards document.” There’s a difference between knowing <i>what</i> students should learn and <i>how</i> to teach it. What support have you received in learning how to teach effectively?

	• How have EdReports and the Common Core standards influenced instruction in your school or district? Many schools dropped Success for All when a new administration took over. • How has leadership turnover affected instruction within your school or district? • What could be put in place to maintain effective programs when leadership changes? Some schools used only parts of Success for All: “Some schools were using it just as a reading curriculum. They weren't doing all the elements – like the tutoring and the attendance. In some cases, it was because they didn't have the staff to do all that. Those schools didn't see great results with Success for All.” • What does this say about the difference between adopting a curriculum and implementing it well? ◦ What does Steubenville’s experience indicate about what it takes to succeed? • How does your school address the “whole child” needs (like attendance, basic needs) that affect reading achievement? <i>From a parenting or community perspective:</i> Leadership turnover and program churn are common in the American education system. • Have you noticed turnover and churn in your district? How has this affected things that you care about? EdReports has influenced billions of dollars in curriculum purchases, though the organization's CEO says “EdReports is a place to start” rather than a final authority. • Do you know how curriculum decisions are made at your school? • How does your district evaluate whether curriculum purchases have been successful? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • What should adults think about when they are choosing reading programs for your school?
Wrap Up	• What are the unintended consequences of creating approved program lists?
Extend	Activity 1 Read the article New reading laws sweep the nation following Sold a Story. Find your state on this map. (Note: The map shows only states that have passed laws on reading instruction since <i>Sold a Story</i> premiered in late 2022. Some additional states had laws or  ARTICLESTATES MAPSTATES LIST

policies in place before the podcast. This is [another source](#) you could consult.)

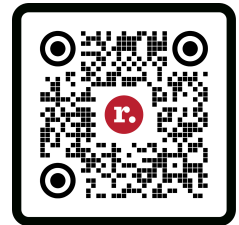
- Has your state passed any science of reading legislation?
- Do you think these laws will help improve instruction? Why or why not?

Activity 2

Read the article [When schools buy new reading programs, they look to EdReports. But some of its reviews don't line up with science.](#)

The article says EdReports won't rereview the 86 programs already published under their previous rating methodology.

- What should districts do if they've already invested in programs that received positive EdReports reviews under the previous methodology?
- What needs to happen to help decision-makers evaluate whether a curriculum is likely to result in improved student achievement?



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Activity 3

Read [The Standards Trap: Why Grade-Level Teaching Fails Our Students.](#) This article provides a teacher's perspective on using a program that was rated positively by EdReports.

From a teaching perspective:

- Did any of what's described in the article remind you of your own teaching experience?
- Have you ever felt pressure to teach lessons that seemed too advanced for your students? How did you handle it?

The article argues that "equity isn't about rushing to grade-level standards — it's about providing the methodical teaching that students deserve."

- Do you agree? How should schools balance high expectations with appropriate teaching for students?
- What does reading this make you think about how a curriculum review process should work?



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Episode 14: The Cuts

Education research is at a turning point in the United States. The Trump administration is slashing government funding for science and dismantling the Department of Education. We look at what the cuts mean for the science of reading — and the effort to get that science into schools.



EPISODE 14

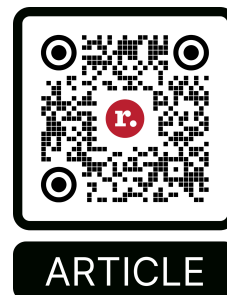
Episode Length	Listen to the Episode	Read the Transcript
41:53	https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2025/08/21/sold-a-story-e14-the-cuts	Printable Transcript
Additional Optional Materials	- APM Reports — ‘At what point does it break?’ Nation’s Report Card at risk, researchers say - What Works Clearinghouse — Practice Guides - NPR — The Doctor Who Championed Hand-Washing And Briefly Saved Lives - American Educational Research Association — Feeling Better: A Comparison of Medical Research and Education Research	

Questions and Topics for Discussing “The Cuts”	
Before Listening	- What do you know about the U.S. Department of Education and its role in education research? - What do you know about the Institute of Education Sciences?
While Listening	What surprises you about the federal government’s involvement in education research?
After Listening	<i>From a teaching perspective:</i> Scientists such as Reid Lyon wanted education research to follow the scientific method more closely. As Emily notes in the episode, “standardized measurement, randomized trials, results that could be replicated. More like medical research.” - Have you ever been involved in research like that? Would you like to be? Why or why not? <i>From a parenting perspective:</i> The episode mentions that in medicine, research often takes decades to change practice; for example, it took doctors years to accept that stomach ulcers are caused by bacteria, not stress. - Does knowing that medicine also struggles with research implementation alter your perspective on the challenges facing education? <i>From a community perspective:</i> Assessment data has played a significant role in education policy decisions. The Trump administration has cut funding for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — often called “the Nation’s Report Card” — which measures reading achievement across the country.

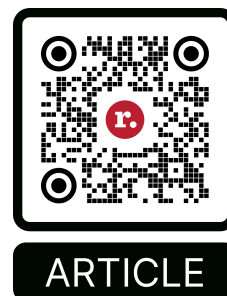
	• What do you think could happen to education reform if there is less reliable data about student outcomes? The National Institutes of Health became involved in reading because people were unable to read the directions on their medications. • What are some other reasons why measuring and addressing reading problems are important to public health? <i>From all perspectives:</i> Mark Schneider argues that the Institute of Education Sciences “blew the dissemination part” — that is, it failed to effectively disseminate research findings into schools. He suggests that Emily’s journalism did more to change reading instruction than “hundreds of millions of dollars of IES research.” • Do you agree? Disagree? • What roles should different groups (researchers, policymakers, journalists, educators) play in helping to get education research into classroom instruction? Schneider also says: “The fact of the matter is, there are over 40 states that are now committed to some version of the science of reading.” • What do you think “being committed to the science of reading” will come to mean in the years to come, given the cuts to reading research? • What questions do you think still need to be answered by research? <i>From a student perspective:</i> Reading researcher Mark Seidenberg says: “It is very, very hard to get anyone to actually do the reading assignments. They don't have to because they can let AI summarize the stuff for them. Well, that has consequences. We need to understand it.” Technology is changing how people read and learn, but funding for research on reading is being cut. • What questions do you think scientists should be studying about how your generation reads? • How do you think research cuts might affect the society you’ll live in as an adult?
Wrap Up	Emily says this at the end of the episode: “This podcast has helped create a sense of urgency, a sense of ‘enough already, we’ve waited too long for kids to get evidence-based reading instruction.’ But evidence-based instruction is still kind of new in education. The Institute of Education Sciences has existed for just over 20 years. That’s barely a generation. Maybe 20 years isn't that long

	when it comes to the complex work of getting research into schools. So yes, there should be urgency about all of this. But maybe things are — or were — just getting started.” • Do you agree? Disagree? Why? • What do you want to remember from this episode? What questions does it leave you with?
Extend	<i>Activity 1</i> Researchers were working to get education research into practice through “practice guides” created by the Institute of Education Sciences. These guides “summarize the most important research and provide tips for teachers based on that research.” They were designed to be “kind of like clinical practice guides that are used in medicine” — a way to translate complex research into practical recommendations for educators. Browse the available practice guides. <i>From a teaching perspective:</i> • Have you used any of these guides? If so, how? • Which ones piqued your interest? <i>From a parenting or community perspective:</i> • Which guides address issues you’ve seen or heard about in your local schools? • How might information from these guides be helpful in advocating for effective instruction in your schools? <i>From a student perspective:</i> • Do any of these guides relate to challenges you’ve experienced in school? • If you could share one of these guides with your teachers, which one would it be and why? <i>From all perspectives:</i> • Are there guides you wish existed but don't see listed? <i>Activity 2</i> Read The Doctor Who Championed Hand-Washing And Briefly Saved Lives. • What similarities do you see between the handwashing story and what you’ve heard about in <i>Sold a Story</i>? Facts were not enough to convince doctors to change practice, and some of Semmelweis’ tactics for spreading the practice of handwashing may have backfired. For example: “Semmelweis was not very tactful. He publicly berated people who disagreed with him and made some influential enemies.”  GUIDES  ARTICLE

	- What does this story make you think about how best to advocate for change in education? Activity 3 Read Carolyn Riehl's article Feeling Better: A Comparison of Medical Research and Education Research. “In the end, although medical research may be better funded, better organized, and considered by some to be more prestigious than education research, the two fields face many similar issues. Even this brief perusal of medical research yields ideas to be borrowed and a comforting realization that the two fields are not always wildly far apart.” - What examples does Riehl provide of delayed adoption of medical research? - How does Riehl’s analysis challenge the common assumption that medicine is an ideal model for education to follow?
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Concluding questions	
Now that you’ve listened to <i>Sold a Story</i>	- What’s your biggest takeaway from <i>Sold a Story</i>? - Did the later episodes change the way you think about the earlier ones in any way? Read ‘There’s a thoughtfulness about reading in the country today.’ - Do you agree that there’s a thoughtfulness about reading today? Why or why not? - What are you going to keep thinking about? - What actions might you take based on what you learned from the podcast and your discussion about it?



We’d love to hear about your *Sold a Story* discussion!

- Email us: soldastory@apmreports.org
- Leave us a voicemail message: (612) 888-7323