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Sold a Story: How teaching kids to read went so wrong

Transcript

[Bonus 2] The Impact

Aaron Freeman: We flew to Vegas.

(Music)

Aaron Freeman was on a trip last Fall with his wife and two sons.

Freeman: We took the boys to the Colts-Raiders game out there. And we drove up to Zion. We did Zion and Bryce.

And somewhere between Bryce Canyon and Zion National Park, his wife said to him - there's a podcast I want you to listen to.

Freeman: She's like – you're going to listen to this. (laughs) Ok. I'm going to listen to this.

His kids had already heard Sold a Story.

Jack: My mom started putting it on a lot during the car ride back and forth between tutoring.

Aaron Freeman is Cooper and Jack Freeman's dad, the boys you met in the last episode.

Cooper: I couldn't read in kindergarten, first grade, second grade. I didn't know what to do.

(Music ends)

Freeman: I had two competing emotional thoughts listening to your podcast.

This is Aaron Freeman again.

Freeman: I literally had a tear in my eye and I was heartbroken for what we've done as a society. And second, I wanted to do physical injury to somebody.

Instead, he decided to write a piece of legislation. Because in addition to being a dad, Aaron Freeman is a state senator in Indiana.

(Music)

He went looking for coauthors.

Hunley: My name is Andrea Hunley. I am a freshman state senator in Indiana.

In January, she went to the state capital to start her new job.

Hunley: I, you know, was meeting other legislators, mingling around, trying to figure out what we have in common. And I met Senator Aaron Freeman.

Freeman: And we strike up a conversation about the science of reading.

Andrea Hunley had been a teacher and a school principal before running for office. And she'd heard the podcast.

Hunley: And he said to me, you know, there's this piece of legislation I really want to work on around the science of reading. And I really would like for this to be a bipartisan piece of legislation.

Andrea Hunley is a Democrat. Aaron Freeman is not.

Freeman: I'm a proud Republican. And although she and I probably don't agree on whatever fiscal policy or whatever the court and criminal code policy is going to be, we agree wholeheartedly on this.

(Music ends)

So they wrote a bill.

Freeman: It would require our teachers to teach the science of reading.

Hunley: This just really draws the line in Indiana that says - this is how we teach reading, and we teach it in ways that are based on science.

Chairman (Indiana Senate floor): Senator Freeman, the floor is yours.

Freeman: Mr. Chairman, thank you.

The bill requires schools to adopt curriculum based on the science of reading. It defines what the "science of reading" means. And the bill bans cueing. Cueing is the idea we focused on in Sold a Story.

Freeman: You cannot require the science of reading and also leave in three cueing. In order to do this correctly, you have to adopt the science of reading, and you have to outlaw three cueing.

(Music)

I'm Emily Hanford. And this is a second bonus episode of Sold a Story, a podcast from APM Reports.

As I said in the previous episode, a lot has been happening in response to the podcast.

Parents are understanding how their kids are being taught to read – and asking, why? Teachers are saying – I knew there was a problem here. What do I need to learn? Principals and superintendents are asking themselves – what have we been paying for, and what do we do now?

And policymakers are saying – no more. We don't want to spend taxpayer money on things that aren't working. We want schools to teach kids to read in ways that line up with scientific evidence.

I'm watching all this and I'm hopeful. But I'm also worried.

(Music ends)

I'm going bring in my colleague, Christopher Peak.

Emily Hanford: Hi Chris.

Christopher Peak: Hi Emily.

Hanford: You have been following what's been going in state legislatures. Tell us a little bit about what's been happening.

Peak: In at least 14 states, legislators have introduced bills to overhaul reading instruction.

Laura Adams: We need to improve reading in Wisconsin. We are all in agreement on that.

Peak: And a lot of them are saying they've listened to our podcast.

Glenn Cordelli (New Hampshire): Exhibit 1 is the result of a five-year investigation by an education reporter into reading instruction.

Peak: It's happening everywhere.

Mike DeWine: I'm calling for a renewed focus on literacy. And on the way we teach reading in the state of Ohio.

Peak: North and South, big states, small states.

Kim Gibbons: Our current statistic in Minnesota is that we have close to 500,000 students that aren't proficient in reading. That is enough to fill up the US Bank Stadium seven and a half times over.

Peak: And it's happening on a bipartisan basis, too.

Hanford: Alright, so tell us a little bit about what kinds of changes they are making, like what are legislators doing, what's in these laws?

Peak: The big focus has been curriculum. There is this unquestioned idea, almost a sacred cow in America, this idea of local control. It's been up to school districts, their boards of education, their superintendent to choose their own curriculum. So you have 13,000 school districts across the country, oftentimes going through the curricular materials out there and choosing for themselves. They don't generally have someone telling them what they can use and what they can't.

But that is changing.

Peak: Legislators want to have more control, to tell school districts - you have now a smaller set of curricula you should be choosing from. There's a lot of urgency - from parents, from our reporting, from tons of other local media covering these issues. And they don't want to stick with the status quo anymore. And they're making very big moves in some of these states.

Some states are compiling lists of approved programs and requiring districts to buy from the list.

Hanford: So what are you hearing from people who think these bills aren't a good idea? What are they concerned about?

Peak: They often make the arguments that justify local control. They don't want someone in their state capital, who has never taught in a classroom before, telling them what to do.

Tina Kotek: We believe in local control here. So it's that balance between decision making and - these are really the best things to do.

That was the governor of Oregon. And this is a hearing in Connecticut.

Fran Rabinowitz: We do not ascribe to mandated commercial programs which carry a heavy price tag.

Faith Sweeney: The Right to Read Act isn't addressing the unique needs of each school district. Instead, the options are a one-size-fits-all, canned program.

There have been a lot of these kinds of hearings and meetings since the podcast. Christopher told me he's listened to more than 80 hours. There was a hearing in Wisconsin that he said was particularly interesting. So I listened to it too.

(roll call)

Peak: Wisconsin doesn't have any legislation in place yet. But the lawmakers got together and had this hearing...

Seidenberg: Thank, thank you. I'm really glad to be here.

Peak: ...to set the stage for the legislation they might introduce, to hear from a couple experts.

Seidenberg: I'm going to talk to you about what the science of reading is.

One of the people who testified was Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive scientist who was in Sold a Story.

Peak: He had a really nuanced take on this question of local control and curriculum.

Seidenberg: I personally view the legislation that's related to the science of reading as kind of the last resort. Something that has been pursued after really kind of several decades of resistance from the educational establishment.

Peak: He said - you don't want it to be this way, you wish that the education establishment would have changed this on their own. That you would have seen publishers and these experts catching up to the science of the reading and putting that into their materials, spreading that knowledge. But that hasn't happened. And so he said that this is a last resort and it might be necessary, but it's not going to be easy.

Seidenberg: You're asking a lot of teachers. To learn something new, to change the way that they do things.

And Seidenberg said he isn't that confident in some of the programs that now say they're aligned with the science of reading.

Seidenberg: So you are seeing people who are interested in maintaining their market share, who are modifying their materials. Good. Are they going to be good materials? Who knows?

Peak: What Seidenberg was saying is that there's no perfect program. A lot of these publishers just a couple years ago were saying - yeah, we believe in balanced literacy. We have everything that Lucy Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell were telling school districts to use for the last couple decades. And some are making a very quick pivot to saying - Oh, yeah, yeah, our programs are with the science of reading now. And I think there's some real skepticism that's merited about whether these programs are all that good, whether they really align with the science of reading and whether buying one of them at the moment is going to get your students where they need to be.

Hanford: Yeah, it was interesting. One of the things I was struck by in his testimony is that he talked about, as we did in *Sold a Story*, that there are some curriculum that are a problem.

Seidenberg: You can weed out bad materials.

Hanford: There are ideas in the curriculum that aren't right, and getting rid of that is a good idea, is what he essentially said.

Seidenberg: So, getting rid of the things that are really bad or forcing those authors and publishers to change those materials – legislation can do that.

Hanford: But he also said this thing that I've been thinking about a lot, which is – I don't see the curriculum as being the solution either.

Seidenberg: If you think that legislation will allow you to focus on - these are the ones that work, these are the ones that don't. The problem is we need new materials, none of them are really great.

Hanford: So curricula can be a problem, but just getting rid of a curriculum and then bringing in a new one. That doesn't solve it. Curriculum doesn't teach kids how to read, right? Teachers do.

(Music)

Many of these science of reading bills *do* try to address things beyond changing curriculum –by including money for teacher training, for example. Or for new assessment systems.

Seidenberg's big message to Wisconsin lawmakers was – be careful. Don't mandate anything you might later regret. Recognize that changing reading instruction is going to be complex. And that telling schools *what* to buy may not be a good idea. But telling them what *not* to buy might be. It's something a number of states are trying to do.

(Music ends)

Hanford: Some states are also actually banning or trying to ban materials and training rooted in the cueing idea that we focused on in *Sold a Story*. So what's in these cueing bans and who's trying to do that?

Peak: Legislators have really identified – this is the problem.

Harold Dutton: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

This is a House committee hearing in Texas, on a bill to ban cueing.

Alma Allan: I just want to ask one question. Did I hear you say banning the use of one procedure?

Dutton: Of three cueing. The three-cueing method.

Allan: Don't use that anymore.

Dutton: No, we're not going to use that anymore.

Peak: There's at least nine states that have introduced these cueing bans in their legislatures.

And since Christopher and I recorded this, at least one more state has introduced a cueing ban.

(Music)

The states include Indiana, Florida, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, West Virginia and Minnesota. And before the podcast, there were already cueing bans in place in Arkansas, Louisiana and Virginia.

When we come back, Christopher and I are going to talk about whether we think these cueing bans are a good idea.

(Music ends)

** BREAK **

(Music)

Andrew Karre: Hello, my name is Andrew Karre.

(Music ends)

This is a listener who left us a message.

Karre: I'm a children's book editor at a very large trade book publishing company.

Andrew Karre told us that he doesn't publish instructional materials. He doesn't have any formal training or expertise in teaching reading. But he was really interested in the podcast.

Karre: I found the podcast series to be really thought provoking and quite informative. I truly learned a lot.

But he called us because he says there was a moment in the final episode where the podcast turned into the Twilight Zone for him.

(Music)

Karre: When you talked about a large Texas school district removing books by the literal truckload because they were used in a discredited reading methodology? And not because they acknowledged the existence of LGBTQIA folks or America's history of racism, it was truly like glimpsing an alternate reality.

Andrew Karre describes himself as left of center politically. It was shocking for him to hear about books being banned in the podcast. Even if it felt like it was for the right reasons, he doesn't think book banning is a good idea.

His message is a reminder that there are politics at play here. There always have been. And I worry about the science of reading getting caught up in partisan politics. That's what happened with Reading First, the Bush era effort to get the science of reading into schools.

And I see some people trying to do that now. To dismiss the science of reading as right wing. But it's not. All I need to do is look at my social media feeds and I see people on the left and the right who are passionate about this issue. Because it's their kids. Their students. Their lives.

(Music ends)

I do worry about that phrase though, "the science of reading." I brought it up when I was talking with Christopher.

Hanford: We've been using the term, in this conversation today, the "science of reading." And I think there's a lot of people who are starting to become like, sort of suspicious of that phrase. Like it's getting used all the time. It's sort of the new phrase, "the science of reading." What is it? And I think there's a good answer. It's a big body of research that's been conducted over decades in labs and in classrooms all over the world, about reading and how it works and how kids learn to do it and why kids struggle. That's really what the science of reading is. But it's become kind of a shorthand and I hear people referring to it like it's a curriculum or an approach. You know, I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about that term. And I was just thinking about it the other day, like - why do I use that term? And I realized that one of the reasons I use the term the "science of reading" is because I don't want to use the word "phonics." Because I think a lot of times, this does get reduced down to just phonics. And we know that learning how to read is about much more than phonics. So when I use the term "science of reading," what I'm often trying to do, I think, is gesture towards something larger. But of course, people can mean all different kinds of things. And now it's just become the shorthand. And, it now becomes the stamp, it becomes the phrase you put on, on your book and in your materials. And that's supposed to be "Oh, yep, science of reading. Check. We're doing that." And it's like, "Wait, hold on a second. What is that?" But the insight I had is, well, the science of reading is a way to signal to people, this isn't just phonics, it's a lot more than that.

Peak: In a lot of bills, I will say, legislators seem to get that there's a lot more than just phonics. You're seeing new legislation say we need to teach background knowledge, we need to really have an emphasis on oral language, these things that have been part of the

research all along, but have not maybe been part of the conversation, when it was just about - are we teaching phonics or not? So I think you're so right that there is this much more inclusive body of evidence out there that we need all of it to inform what instruction looks like. And it's just now going to be a matter of whether that trickles down to schools, to the people enforcing these laws, if they really understand all the nuance that goes into the science of reading.

Hanford: So, what do you think about these cueing bans? Do you think they're a good idea?

Peak: I think they, they probably are. Um, I think that we've tried so many times to change reading instruction. And a lot of times what happens is, districts say - Oh, I just need to add in a little bit of phonics. So, they'll buy a new program but never change their fundamental practices.

(Music)

That's what Sold a Story was about. That many school districts never took away those cueing strategies.

Peak: They might do a little phonics for 10, 15 minutes and then they go back to teaching kids - Okay, let's just look at the first letter, you know that. And look at the picture and think of something that makes sense. We've never uprooted that practice.

And Christopher thinks these cueing bans are probably good because the goal is to *finally* get rid of the idea that kids don't need to learn how to sound out written words because they have other strategies they can use instead.

Peak: Now, having someone up at the capital telling you that might not be the best way. But it, I think, is forcing districts to have these conversations. When a state bans an instructional practice, that's a big deal.

Hanford: You're, you're right. A lot of what our reporting is focusing on is that there's this idea at the root that has never been gotten rid of, that people have been trying to get rid of for a long time. But I have to say these cueing bans give me pause because immediately the question is, once you take something away, what do you replace it with? And so I am worried about that rush to buy new stuff. Because a lot of this stuff is untested. And I have a fear that ineffective practices might get put into place, like actually put into law and policy. I think we're at risk of that. However, I think overall, this was the point of our reporting—schools were adding stuff without taking away the idea that was a big part of the problem. And now people are really looking at that problematic idea.

(Music ends)

But getting this right is going to be challenging. When Christopher and I were talking, I thought of a quote from Mark Seidenberg.

Hanford: He wrote an essay recently, and it's about this complexity of education. Basically that education is complex. Change is really complex. And I think he put it really well. He wrote:

“Incorporating scientific findings and attitudes into education is a monumental challenge. The educational establishment is a very large, complex ecosystem that evolved over many decades, without incorporating cognitive research. We are now observing in real time what happens when basic research is released into this environment.”

Peak: Yeah.

And Christopher and I are both concerned about the pressure that teachers and schools are now under – in part *because* of our reporting.

Peak: This is not going to be a quick fix. I saw one school district that, they currently only have 38 percent of their kids reading where they want them to be. And they're hoping that by 2024, next year, they're going to be up to 80. That does not seem feasible to me. And I think that's the kind of —as important as it is to get those kids reading—if they don't reach the 80, they might say the science of reading failed. And that's a real worry.

Hanford: Definitely. These goals that we put in education - like by next year, 80 percent of kids will be reading on grade level. Just because, like our system, you're supposed to do that, you're like - everyone's gonna work really hard and get to that. And you think - Well, what, what would it take to really do that? Do you know? Do you know how you would do that? Because if you really knew how you would do that, that wouldn't be your goal. You have to set, we have to set realistic goals here. Not to say we shouldn't be really urgent and help the kids out there who are struggling with reading. But if we set unrealistic goals, it's just, there's no way it won't fail.

(Music)

I don't want it to fail. Neither does Christopher. We want more kids to be good readers. Claude Goldenberg does, too. You met Claude in the last episode. And I'm going to bring him back because when I was talking to him, he brought up an idea for how to prevent failure.

Goldenberg: It's a very provocative idea.

It's called a pre-mortem. As opposed to a post-mortem. A pre-mortem is something you do before you put a plan into place. To try to prevent the plan from failing.

Goldenberg: You have this plan that you're thinking of putting into place, and you bring all of the heads of departments, or whoever's going to be charged with implementing this plan together, and say - Okay, here's the plan. I want you to imagine it is three years after

the plan has been implemented and it has failed. Right? Just, it failed. This thing is just dead as a doornail. And I want you to think about all the reasons that tanked it. Why did it go wrong?

(Music ends)

He thinks educators should try this pre-mortem idea before they put plans into place to change how reading is taught.

Goldenberg: This can actually be a way to get people to take off their blinders and stop kind of the groupthink and shared assumptions that make it very difficult to really think seriously about what could go wrong before you implement something and you know, and things go south.

(Music)

I like this pre-mortem idea. Imagine all the ways the science of reading could go wrong. Prepare for failure to try to prevent it. And something else I've been thinking about as a way to prevent failure: don't put too much trust in any one person or any one program or any one idea. Keep asking questions. Stay curious. Stay humble. There's a lot to learn.

And I'm feeling hopeful because of teachers. So many teachers. Who want this. They want to teach kids how to read.

Teacher 1: I can tell you that I absolutely am changing the way I teach reading.

Teacher 2: It's going to be uncomfortable; it's going to be stressful. But if we want to help our students, we do need to make changes. Big changes.

Teacher 3: You have changed the way that I will teach, and I am very grateful for that.

Teacher 4: As I've implemented science of reading practices over the last two years, the reading abilities of my students has exponentially increased. I've got confident, happy little readers.

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Let's just go. And let's just teach these kids to read. That's it. There's no controversy. No argument. That's it.

(Music ends)

(New music)

That's it for now for Sold a Story. This bonus episode was produced by me with Christopher Peak and Eliza Billingham. Chris Julin was our editor. He also did mixing and sound design and made some of the music. Final mastering of this episode was by Alex Simpson. Our theme music was by Jim Brunberg and Ben Landsverk of Wonderly.

The APM Reports digital editor is Andy Kruse. Our acting deputy managing editor is Tom Scheck. Jane Helmke is our executive editor.

Special thanks to Catherine Winter, Chris Worthington and Stephen Smith. And to everyone who wrote and who left us messages.

We have more about legislation on reading – including a map where you can find out what might be changing in your state. It's at our website, soldastory.org. We also have a reading list and a podcast discussion guide. If you're interested in the article by Mark Seidenberg that I mentioned, or the article Claude Goldenberg wrote about that pre-mortem idea, you can find links in the show notes.

If you want to help more people find this podcast, you can leave a review wherever you are listening. And you can still write to us. Our email is soldastory@americanpublicmedia.org.

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(Music ends)

Hanford: Okay. Done?

LeQuisha Underwood: That's it.

Todd Collins: Alright. Well, great talking to you!

Virginia Quinn-Mooney: Thanks guys.

Reid Lyon: You bet. Bye.

Voice 3: Thanks so much. Bubyee.

Voice 4: Alright, take care. Thanks for your work, bye.

Voice 5: Okay, thanks. Bye.

Hanford: Okay. I'm gonna turn this off now.