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# THE RIGHT

The greatest civil rights issue of our time

# TO READ

NAACP



## *Discussion Guide*

The story of the literacy crisis in  
America and what we can do about it.

By Dr. Jasmine Rogers & Dr. Phelton Moss

June 2024

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# Contents

Editorial Advisory Board	2
Special Introduction	2
Reading: A Historical Civil Right, When We Get it Right	4
Introduction to This Guide	6
Part 1: Understanding the Literacy Crisis	8
Part 2: Addressing Systemic Barriers	14
Part 3: Empowering Educators	18
Part 4: The Power of Family and Building Community Partnerships	24
Part 5: Taking Action	28
Conclusion	31
Additional Resources	33
Author & Editorial Advisory Board Biographies	34
Endnotes	39

## Reading: A Historical Civil Right, When We Get it Right

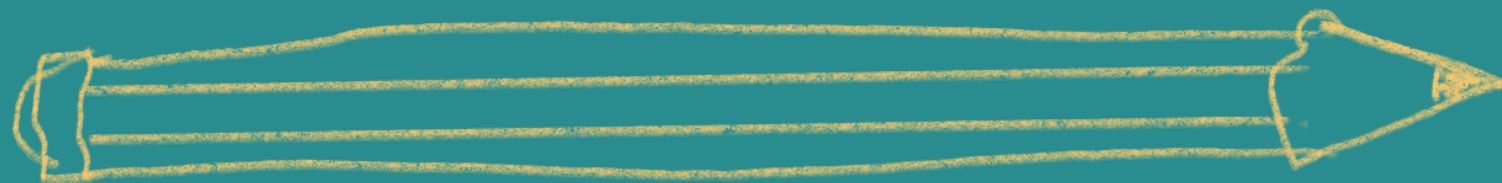
Historically for Black people in the United States, literacy was much more than the ability to decode the words on a page, it was also a tool for liberation and meaning--a weapon to combat injustice and exclusion, and a vehicle for joy. Literacy was never a separate content area to learn, it was the means and access to mathematics, science, history, literature, language, culture and to life. When Black people taught their children how to read, they did it within five groundbreaking literacy pursuits which included, teaching children to know their multiple and genius **identities**, teaching students reading **skills** paired with other multiliteracies, teaching new knowledge, set into action or **intellectualism**, teaching **criticality** and how to disrupt oppressions, and elevating **joy**. Today, we only teach decontextualized skills yet Black people historically taught their children to not only read the words in print, but to also read the world—connecting reading education to higher goals of self-determination, self-empowerment, and self-liberation.

In the U.S., literacy was forbidden for Black people starting in the 1600s and when learning how to read finally became legal, children still had no curricular reparations and were forced to learn reading grounded in the Eurocentric theories, white-centered literature and curriculum absent of identity, intellect, criticality or joy. This historical neglect and educational inhumanity led to chronicled underachievement of children across the nation. This is why the NAEP reading data (while an imperfect test) shows that the system, which includes curriculum and instruction, has historically failed our nation's children, and more so for Black children. This promoted the urgent need for *The Right to Read* documentary and their response to the failing system to teach children how to successfully read.

Given the state of literacy education, we know that the real gap is not between Black and white children's achievement but the real gap is between the brilliance of historical Black literacy education/critical research and the actual curriculum and instruction we see in schools today. There still remains a debate and "Reading Wars" on what children need to learn how to read. And in many ways, the reading curriculum has remained unchanged. Curriculum creators and policy makers still put fresh coats of paint on the same poor structures and processes of previous theories and versions of reading instruction that have never increased achievement. This is nothing new, just new names or coats of paint still neglecting children's histories, identities, literacies, and liberation.

*The Right to Read* returns and reminds us of a purposeful literacy that connects reading to our world. This important, truth-telling documentary pushes back on the curriculum companies who have gained financial wealth from reading programs and children's failure, never designed to respond to the genius and individual needs of youth. *The Right to Read* urgently moves our thinking to our ethical responsibilities to give children the best and brightest. It is our responsibility to question the curriculum and move beyond it. Teaching reading is not just connected to present goals, but remembering a rich Black lineage of the past and moving toward an enlightening future. Literacy is indeed a historic and civil right and children have the right to be taught in ways that prepares them for the fullness of their lives.

**Dr. Gholdy Muhammad**  
June 2024





## Introduction to This Guide

6 *The Right to Read* provides three perspectives on America's literacy crisis. Following a teacher, two families, and an activist, this film paints a picture of the barriers individuals, families, and communities face in pursuing high-quality literacy education for future generations. As the individuals in the film work to overcome these obstacles to give children the ultimate foundational skill for success, reading, the film highlights the dire need and importance of high-quality literacy instruction in schools.

Illiteracy increases the statistical likelihood that an individual will interact with the criminal punishment system and face challenges in gaining employment and being unhoused. Everyone must learn to read in a society that relies heavily on written text.

This guide aims to engage policymakers, advocates, and educators in a discussion about our roles in the literacy crisis and how we will work to shift the narrative. This discussion guide also aims to give the reader an understanding of what they should know about reading education as we face a national literacy crisis.

This literacy crisis is not new; the "Reading Wars" have been occurring within the nation's school system, pitting various reading methods against one another. This country has aligned with various types of reading instruction, including the whole word method, balanced literacy method, and guided reading.

It is clear based on research that the best way to teach children to read is by utilizing a multi-disciplinary body of research that has a proven success rate called, "the science of reading." In the film, you'll see a teacher shift her instruction from balanced literacy to structured literacy instruction based on the science of reading.



The science of reading is not a curriculum, a set of lessons, or a program; it is an overarching body of research that utilizes brain science, linguistics, developmental psychology, and education to explain how one learns to read. The science of reading encourages educators to explicitly instruct students in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

These five elements are ESSENTIAL to student reading success. The critical thing to remember is that reading is not a guessing game. As you'll see in the film, poor methods of teaching students to read, including guessing based on the shape of the word, skipping over words or guessing without looking at the words, and only looking at pictures, are used in our classrooms across the country.

7 If these poor practices continue, our children will not learn to read. Our students deserve the right to read, and the best way to make that happen is to equip their teachers and schools with the appropriate tools to implement reading instruction based on the science of reading.

**Dr. Jasmine Rogers**  
**Dr. Phelton Moss**  
June 2024

# Part I: Understanding the Literacy Crisis



0:00-8:30

In this clip, you see the presentation of the Literacy Crisis in the United States of America. Kareem Weaver opens the film by advocating for his family and demonstrating his steps to ensure his children are literate. The clip moves to Kareem in the classroom advocating for the students he taught. As an advocate for literacy, Kareem states, "Literacy is our greatest civil right. If you can't read, you can't access anything in our society."



## Discussion Questions:

1. What is a civil right, and why is literacy the most significant civil right?
2. How does this clip highlight the issue of access to literacy for Black students?
3. Activist Kareem Weaver states, "We in the information right now, and you can't read the information.\*" Why do students, particularly Black students, need access to literacy? What limitations do students have when they are illiterate? What power do students hold when they are literate? How does the advocacy for Black literacy empower the Black community?
4. Based on the clip, what is the most significant barrier to literacy in the Black community? What must occur for all students to learn to read?

\* Throughout the film and this guide, you'll see the use of Black Language (BL). Black Language (also known as African American Language, African American English, or Black English) is a rule-governed and systematic language many Black Americans utilize. BL has language structure, vocabulary, and grammar. BL has roots in West African and other African Diaspora languages. In the United States of America, enslaved Africans utilized their various language systems to communicate with one another and the enslavers. Within this communication system, Black people could utilize the enslavers' language in a manner that allowed them to speak openly with one another while in the presence of those who kept them bound.

The continued use of BL demonstrates the genius of Black people in utilizing the language system they were forced into and creating a system of communication that provides a cultural connection between Black Americans. Generations of linguists have documented, researched, and legitimized Black Language. Linguists recognize BL as a rich language with its structure, including phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and historical and literary use. As you engage with the film, consider your beliefs about language.



### Important Background Information on the Literacy Crisis:

The United States of America is experiencing a literacy crisis. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), or the "Nation's Report Card," shows decreased reading proficiency among 4th and 8th graders since 2019. NAEP found that 37% of 4th graders in America are reading below basic.

According to NAEP, if you are reading at a "below basic" level, it means you have trouble reading. This percentage increased from 2019, when the number was 34%. These numbers include kids from all different backgrounds and family incomes. The data is more concerning when you consider that 29% of students performed on a basic level, meaning they could identify some key elements of the text and provide general reference to or meaning of the text.

Overall, only 35% of American 4th graders from all backgrounds read at a performance level deemed proficient or advanced. Narrowing the conversation to Black students, 56% of Black 4th graders are reading "below basic." In 2019, the results showed that half of the Black students finishing high school were still "below basic." There is a demonstrated overlap between the disproportionate identification of Black students for special education services and the economic realities that many Black families are facing. NAEP also found that 70% of 4th graders with disabilities and 52% of 4th graders who get free or reduced-price lunch are reading at a "below basic" level.

Local tax dollars fund schools, and if the area has low socioeconomic status (SES), the funds for the local schools will also be low. Unfortunately, lower funding means less money to pay and train teachers and buy high-quality reading curricula, technology, and other resources necessary to teach reading instruction effectively. Due to underfunding, low SES schools may experience a shortage of teachers in areas that need the most, such as special education and multilingual learner support. Often, students in low-income neighborhoods do not have the same opportunities to attend preschool as their higher SES peers. Given the essential nature of early childhood education on foundational literacy skills, students in low-income neighborhoods often enter school lacking the foundational skills necessary for later reading success.

Research shows that schools in areas with higher socioeconomic status have higher test scores, can pay teachers more, and have more resources for materials and professional development. Students from low-income families might face food insecurity, housing instability, and other stressors that can impact their ability to focus on learning. These stressors can cause an increase in mental health issues, which are also a barrier to a child's learning success. They also often lack access to resources to help them become successful readers, including books, outside-of-school tutoring, and internet access at home.



It's challenging because low-income neighborhood schools also have a human capital issue. Experienced educators often do not want to teach in or stay at schools that lack critical supplies. The teachers working in those buildings are usually left to pursue training independently, as the schools may lack resources for ongoing professional development. With proper support, teachers can meet the needs of their students who need them the most. After experiencing low scores year over year, schools in low-income areas may have lower expectations for students in their schools. The implicit biases that some educators have can impact instructional practices, and as a result, educators struggle to meet the needs of their students.

Addressing the root causes of the literacy crisis requires advocacy work that includes policy changes, increased funding, community support, and targeted interventions to ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed in reading. Addressing the finances surrounding resources is necessary for students to have greater access to educational resources such as books, computers, internet access, and extracurricular activities.

Additional funding can translate into better facilities, more experienced teachers, smaller class sizes, and a more comprehensive range of extracurricular activities. Schools in low-income areas often struggle with inadequate funding, and the quality of education they can provide can increase if they have financial support.

Early childhood education is crucial, as early exposure to a rich learning environment can set the stage for future academic success. Early learning engagement supports a student's brain and social development, which sets them up for success as they learn foundational reading skills.

Supporting families as they navigate daily challenges can help change the course of the literacy crisis. Hardworking parents in lower-income communities often work multiple jobs or have less flexible schedules, leaving limited time to support students with homework, attend parent-teacher conferences, and advocate for their children's needs. Creating alternative schedules for parent-teacher conference days or being willing to meet by video chat can go a long way to supporting a student's needs. Low-income families often experience higher levels of stress due to financial instability, housing insecurity, and other socioeconomic pressures. Chronic stress can impair cognitive functions and emotional regulation, negatively affecting a child's learning capacity. Addressing these disparities requires systemic efforts, including equitable school funding, access to quality early childhood education, and policies supporting family stability and economic mobility.

## Additional Questions for Consideration ?

### For Policymakers

1. What are the policy barriers and opportunities that either accelerate or diminish reading gains? How is their effectiveness being measured?
2. What parts of the policy ecosystem exist to support underserved, multilingual learners or learners with dyslexia?

### For Advocates

1. What kinds of data and research might advocates adjacent to decision-making use to convince policy actors to change policy and practice?
2. How can I involve community organizations to support students and families in their quest for literacy?

### For Educators

1. How are leaders determining reading proficiency within each school?
2. What opportunities are required for teachers to become great reading teachers? What skills am I teaching that lead to more proficient readers?



## Part 2: Addressing Systemic Barriers

”Our country has always prioritized reading, either to include or exclude certain people.”

- Kareem Weaver

Given that laws were in place in the United States that codified punishment for teaching Black people, whether free or enslaved (28:22), it is essential that we address literacy in today’s policy. Policies and initiatives at federal, state, and local levels must address literacy issues in the United States. Those policies should focus on early childhood education, teacher training, school funding, and enhancing the science of reading-based literacy programs.

While this list is not exhaustive, here are some examples of literacy policies in the US:

- + **The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** is a federal law that replaced No Child Left Behind. It emphasizes the need for high-quality education for all students. It provides states with greater flexibility in using federal funds to improve literacy. ESSA includes provisions for literacy grants that support comprehensive literacy instruction from early childhood through Grade 12.
- + **The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** ensures that students with disabilities receive free and appropriate public education, including special education and related services tailored to their needs. IDEA includes provisions for addressing literacy challenges among students with disabilities.

At the local level, many states have developed literacy plans and programs to improve reading proficiency. These plans often include professional development for teachers, early intervention programs, and initiatives to engage families and communities in supporting literacy. In addition, early literacy initiatives in many states aim to ensure children enter kindergarten with the foundational skills needed for reading.

Addressing literacy issues requires a targeted, collaborative approach involving the federal, state, and local governments, schools, communities, and families. Continued investment in evidence-based literacy programs and equitable access to resources is essential for improving reading outcomes for all students.

Several solutions that can help improve literacy rates include investing in early childhood education, supporting families, providing equitable school funding, and supporting professional development initiatives.

Investing in high-quality early childhood education programs can ensure children develop foundational literacy skills before kindergarten. Programs like Head Start can support young children from low-income families. Encouraging and equipping parents to support their children’s literacy development at home is necessary. Supporting early literacy skills at home can be done through parent education programs, providing access to books and reading materials, and creating family literacy events.

Ensuring that all schools, especially those in low-income areas, receive adequate funding for quality education can be accomplished with policy.

Funding supports schools infrastructure, hiring qualified teachers, and providing up-to-date learning materials. Providing ongoing professional development for teachers focused on science-based literacy instruction methods. Training should include strategies for teaching reading to students with dyslexia.

Additionally, comprehensive literacy programs spanning early childhood through high school can help improve literacy rates. Programs should include phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, reading comprehension strategies, and writing instruction. Within those programs, targeted interventions should occur to support students who struggle to read.

Identifying struggling readers early and providing targeted interventions can help them catch up. These programs should ensure children can access various reading materials by supporting school libraries, public libraries, and community-based book distribution programs. They should also integrate technology to enhance literacy instruction. Digital tools and resources can provide interactive and personalized learning experiences that engage students and support their reading development.

Policymakers can address literacy issues at the national level by increasing funding for literacy programs, supporting early childhood education, and enhancing teacher professional development.





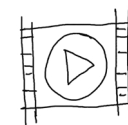
Kareem states



8:24

“Kids of all races are struggling to read, the issue is, who has the resources to deal with it?”

The news headlines read



7:40

“How ‘Reading Instruction’ Fails Black and Brown Children,” “Early Education Gaps by Social Class and Race Start US Children Out on Unequal Footing,” and “No systemic racism? Look at student achievement gaps in reading.”

Discussion Questions



1. What are the barriers to student reading success?
2. What resources are needed to combat the literacy crisis?

*nee*



## Additional Questions for Consideration

### For Policymakers

1. Direct question from Kareem Weaver in the film: "Do we have the political will and moral courage and fortitude to use literacy as a vehicle to include all?"
2. What state and local policies contribute to the systemic barriers to everyone's access to high-quality literacy instruction?

### For Advocates

1. What strategies can I enact to engage the community to advocate for policy change?

### For Educators

1. Which teacher training initiatives have been most beneficial to me? Which initiatives should I lobby my school administration to get involved in?



## Part 3: Empowering Educators

Kareem Weaver challenges the film viewers to get into local schools and examine what is happening in the classroom. The following section provides specific examples of comprehensive literacy across various grade levels. Here's what it looks like at different stages:

**Pre-Kindergarten:** Students should gain an understanding of what letters look like and the sounds they make, hear units of sounds (syllables, onset-rime, and phonemes) within words, be able to write their name, remember what they hear for a short time, understanding how books work, including where to start reading, which way the words go and which way to turn pages.

Classrooms engaging in this work have instructional practices that engage in talking and listening, emphasizing being able to communicate orally and understand what others say, an emphasis on the alphabet, sound practice, and physical engagement with books.

The interactions between Ivy and her parents exemplify the rich language in their home that one should see in a Pre-Kindergarten classroom.

**Kindergarten-Grade 2:** Students are developing further awareness of the sounds in language and how they link with letters. At this stage, students should engage in phoneme (the smallest unit of sound) level work within structured phonological awareness instruction. Students should work on decoding or matching the letters they see with sounds and reading words to get to automatic word recognition, analyzing word parts, and writing words.

Classrooms engaging in this work have instructional practices leading to reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

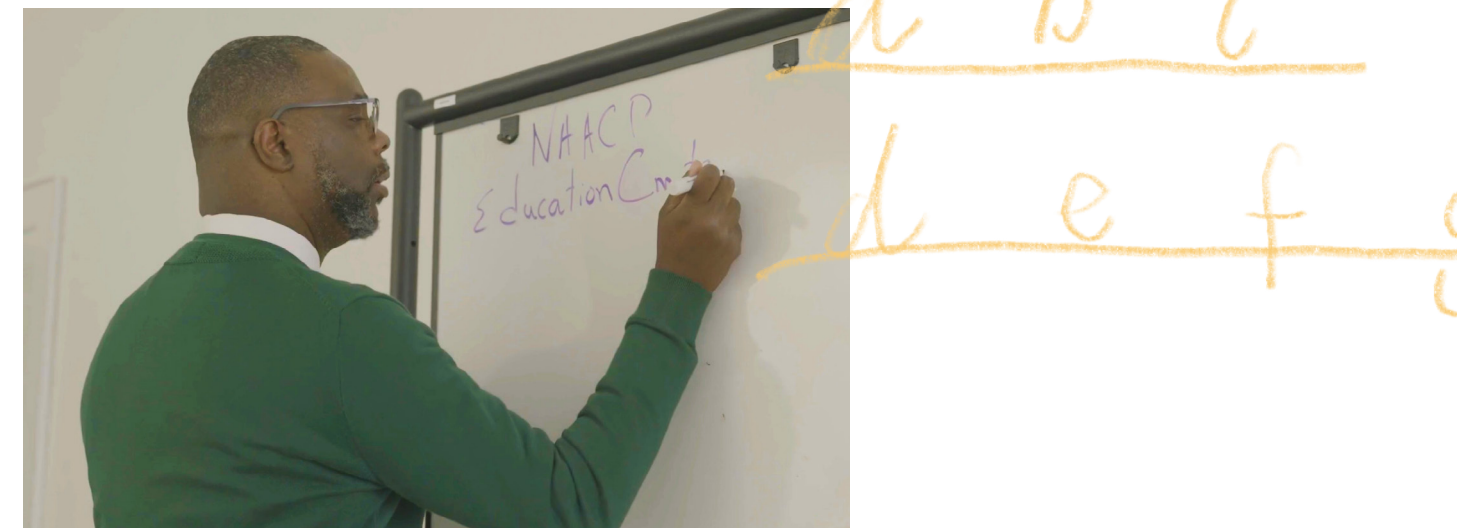
Fred Jr.'s new teacher is engaging in strong literacy practices, focusing on words that have blends and providing students with the opportunity to read, spell, and write these words. (40:00)

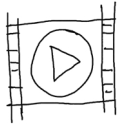
**Grades 3-5:** In the United States, standardized testing often begins in the third grade. Students should be readers at this point, however, national literacy scores show this is simply not true—literacy instruction shifts from the foundational literacy skills listed above toward reading comprehension. In Grades 3-5, there is an emphasis on gaining knowledge and information from texts.

Students who struggle to read at this stage may receive intervention services that could include support from a special education teacher, literacy specialist, or in the classroom in a small group from the classroom teacher. Interventions at this level should focus on providing students access to grade-level text while supporting the development of foundational literacy skills.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What does literacy instruction look like in the classrooms in this film?
2. What questions could you ask your child's teacher about their literacy instruction?
3. If your local school system utilizes a curriculum with bad practices, what can you do about it? How can you engage with your local school board? How can you support a teacher like Ms. Causey, who shifted to best instructional practices for students despite her school's curriculum? How can you advocate for educators working to do the right thing?





8:30

In this clip, Kareem Weaver hones in on reading instruction delivered in the classroom as he shares that students across the country, regardless of background, are dealing with the literacy crisis. Ms. Causey shares the ineffective teaching approaches that her school's curriculum required her to teach.

The "Reading Wars" contributed to the mixed messaging teachers received about how to teach children how to read. Teachers make instructional decisions that require them to juggle the teaching requirements of the curriculum chosen by the school and the variety of needs in the classroom, including students that receive special education services, have a variety of language needs and social needs that require attention.

As seen in the clip, teachers see when students are unsuccessful with methods that are mandated to teach.



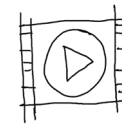
9:20-11:30

In addition, initiatives change, sometimes from year to year, and teachers are weary of the changes. Teachers have been disappointed by the promise that each new initiative would lead to success. Introducing literacy instruction based on the science of reading brings hope to initiative-weary educators as they see students succeeding in reading.

### Discussion Questions



1. What teaching practices did you see in the clip? Which practices align with how students learn to read?
2. What practices surprised you? Have you seen any of these practices in the schools in your community?
3. How can we anchor teachers' success with structured literacy instruction and ensure that the science of reading is not just another initiative?



40:55

Ms. Causey engages in whole-group instruction that aligns the letters in the alphabet to the sounds they represent. She shares that she no longer uses the curriculum described in the film's beginning. She's using a program that provides a clear trajectory for student learning. This curriculum allows her to make adjustments targeted for the individual students in her classroom, allowing her to deliver tailored literacy instruction based on the student's particular needs. Ms. Causey was a new teacher who chose to use a curriculum different from the school-approved curriculum to support her student's literacy acquisition skills.

**Before this point in the film, you see practices not supportive of building those skills.**

Foundational literacy skills, including phonics and phonological awareness, are the building blocks for future reading success. Phonics helps students understand that the symbols (print) we see correlate with the sounds we say. Phonological awareness supports students' ability to manipulate individual units of sound.

This bold action from a new teacher is essential to highlight, as it was evident that she didn't get the skills she needed to teach children in her teacher preparation program. As highlighted in the film, most teacher preparation programs failed when training educators to teach reading.

School districts must fill the gaps to ensure their students receive high-quality literacy instruction (45:14). When determining which training to attend, teachers must demand training that addresses literacy development and science-based instructional practices and demonstrates effectiveness for students. This type of training must be available at the district level for teachers to be successful in the mission to teach students to read.

Quality foundational literacy teacher training equips teachers with a deep understanding of how children acquire literacy skills. Quality training includes information about the brain and knowledge of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension. With this understanding, teachers can create effective lesson plans and adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of their students.

Training programs should emphasize the science of reading-aligned instructional practices that effectively teach literacy acquisition skills. Programs should support teachers in identifying early signs of reading difficulties so they can provide timely interventions to help struggling readers. Quality training prepares educators to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of all their students, including strategies for teaching English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from various cultural backgrounds.

Effective training should include using assessments to monitor student progress and inform instruction. Teachers learn how to interpret assessment data and use it to adjust their teaching strategies, ensuring that instruction is responsive to student needs. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work for students. Teachers must respond to individual student needs, and the training should reflect that.

Ultimately, well-trained teachers have a significant impact on student achievement. Studies consistently show that high-quality teaching is among the most critical factors in student success. By investing in teacher training, schools can improve literacy outcomes and ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop strong reading skills.

Foundational literacy skills, including phonics and phonological awareness, are the building blocks for future reading success. The most effective approach to teaching students to read is systematic, explicit, and cumulative. There are several key pieces to successful literacy skills instruction. The activities may differ depending on the grade level, but the core approaches are the same. The core approaches are as follows:



- + **Print Concepts**—These concepts let students know how to engage with a book, holding it, knowing which direction to read, and supporting students with the understanding that the symbols on the page hold meaning.
- + **The Alphabetic Principle**—This refers to students knowing the letter names and sounds, which is essential for later reading success.
- + **Phonological Awareness**—Phonological awareness means that a student can identify and manipulate the individual sounds in words. Phonological awareness instruction looks different depending on the student's age. For younger children, this could be identifying that the first sound in bat is /b/; for older students, it may be understanding that substituting the /r/ in sprint for /l/, the new word is splint.
- + **Phonics**—Phonics supports students with understanding the phoneme/grapheme relationship or matching the symbols on the page to the sounds we say. Phonics is an essential element, but not the only part of foundational literacy instruction.

## Additional Questions for Consideration ?

### For Policymakers

1. What funds are allocated to teacher training in my local district?
2. When do teachers have paid time to engage in professional development opportunities?
3. How can I support initiatives that allow for effective teacher training?

### For Advocates

1. What information should parents have when discussing literacy with their schools, and how can I share it?

### For Educators

1. What does high-quality literacy training look like?
2. How do I translate the information from training into high-quality literacy practices in my classroom?
3. How do I identify quality instructional materials?



## Part 4: The Power of Family and Building Community Partnerships

Throughout the film, we see three Black families: The Weavers', The Hunters', and The Adams-Staples' Families, with different aged children (high school/college age, elementary and toddler), and in various parts of the country (Mississippi/Memphis, Norfolk, and Oakland). Across their lines of difference, you can see similarities in how each family supports their children's literacy development and advocates for their children.

These success stories highlight families' power and the vital role they play in developing their student's ability to acquire foundational literacy skills.

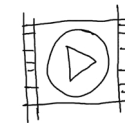
The Hunter family supported Ivy's language development in partnership with the LENA Program. Successful community-based literacy programs are essential in addressing the literacy crisis by providing resources, support, and opportunities for additional learning. Partnering with community stakeholders when teaching students to read is important to build a support network, provide enriched learning experiences, and engage families in the literacy process.

Local businesses, non-profits, health care providers, and libraries are examples of community partners that can offer resources and support that supplement what the school provides. While schools can help access books and technology, community partners can ensure that students receive support outside of schools, addressing more holistic needs, like food, healthcare, and safety.

Creating opportunities for rich learning environments such as after-school programs, summer camps, and library activities are ways community members can support the extension of learning outside the classroom. Supporting schools' requests for community participation in school events can help students understand the importance of literacy in real-life contexts.

Community support can spark a child's desire to fully engage in their learning process. It can make learning more relevant and exciting for them. Engaging the community in solving the literacy crisis shifts some of the burden, spreading the responsibility of creating a more literate society to everyone, providing room for a sustainable and long-term impact, and preventing burnout from just one party.

Historically, literacy has been a community-based activity in the Black community. As shared earlier in the film, there were laws in the United States that made it illegal to teach Black people to read. During those times, Black Americans would gather in community and teach one another to read, despite the consequences. Highlighting the intergenerational pursuit of literacy in the Black community, the film shares information about the creation of HBCUs. The community's desire for literacy was so great that schools were founded for Black people to attend during historical periods of segregation. Literacy has been an integral part of the Black community throughout US history.



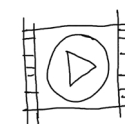
0:00-2:00

There is a montage of Kareem Weaver reading to his children, practicing reading, and playing games throughout their childhood. There is evidence of a literacy-rich home, with books, newspapers, and computers visible throughout the house.



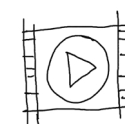
18:01

This clip opens with Teresa empowering her then-two-year-old daughter Ivy with positive affirmations to start her day. This clip models the importance of rich oral language interactions in the home. Given that families are their children's first teachers, this clip models how parents and caregivers can support their children with foundational literacy at home. Through interactions in this clip, Ivy experiences positive modeling of reading and oral language use, including vocabulary development, taking turns in conversation, and pointing out details in text.



24:00

In this clip, the Adams-Staples Family shares that Fred Jr. experienced a speech delay during toddlerhood and received support from a speech-language pathologist starting at age 4. The Adams-Staples family actively supports Fred Jr. and utilizes educational technology to support the acquisition of foundational literacy skills.



26:50

Kareem Weaver takes an active role in supporting his son in a college information session. He reminds his son that he will have to read a lot and read often in college.



36:40

The Adams-Staples family moved from Mississippi, where there have been record-breaking gains in student literacy achievement across the state, to Memphis, Tennessee, where the literacy rates remain low. They made this move for better employment opportunities for the family. Throughout an interstate move to improve their economic situation, with two young children, we see the Adams-Staples family continue to engage in strong literacy practices at home.



Discussion Questions

1. How does each family embrace their role as their child's first teacher?
2. What do literacy practices look like in each home? What are the similarities? What are the differences?
3. The Adams-Staples Family moves across state lines for better economic opportunities. What challenges might a family face when pursuing better financial opportunities for their family? How did the Adams-Staples family remain committed to their children's reading education throughout the film?
4. How do The Hunters interact with Ivy at home? How does this support her pre-literacy skills?

*nee*



Additional Questions for Consideration

For Policymakers

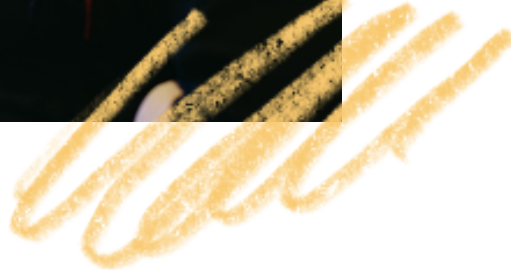
1. What partnerships are formed in my community to support a gap in policy? How can I engage with my constituents to support literacy efforts in the community?

For Advocates

1. How can I spread the word about community programming to families in my district?

For Educators

1. What strategies can I implement to involve the community in literacy-centered programming? How can family literacy nights be more engaging?



# Part 5: Taking Action

We must examine ourselves inwardly to determine our role and course of action in addressing the literacy crisis. Reflect on the following questions as you plot your course of action.

## Questions for Consideration

### For Policymakers

1. What is my role in addressing the literacy crisis?
2. What are the literacy goals of my local school district? How are they being monitored?

### For Advocates

1. What are the children in my community interested in? How well are they reading? Do they understand what they are reading?
2. What are the strong literacy traditions in my community? What are the local events that I can support?
3. What action steps can I take to engage the community in advocating for high-quality literacy instruction?

### For Educators

1. How well are my students reading? What specific foundational skills do my students struggle with? How can I address that in my instruction?
2. What are my students' lives like outside of school? How does my understanding of their backgrounds influence the instructional decisions I make?
3. What strategies am I using to address the literacy needs of all my students? How can I further my understanding of literacy and best teach foundational literacy skills to students of all ages and stages?



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## Conclusion

Far too often, Black kids are trapped in schools and communities where conceptions of literacy instruction and policy are non-existent. This conversational guide is offered as the beginnings of dialogue aimed at shifting local and state policy as a conduit to increasing the share of Black students who are reading. Moreover, we offer this conversational guide as an anchor for exploiting the necessary pedagogy for effective foundational literacy instruction. As such, structured literacy instruction is essential for students to access texts in the classroom. The most effective approach to teaching students to read is systematic, explicit, and cumulative.

As you utilize this guide, our aspiration is that these questions have guided policy shapers, informers, and actors in the present-day civil rights crisis. What is more, our aspiration is that you yield this tool to begin the framework for literacy policy-making, shaping, and informing.





32



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# Additional Resources

- + [NAACP](#)
- + [The Right to Read Film](#)
- + [Black Language Syllabus](#)
- + [Dyslexia Alliance for Black Children](#)
- + [The Right to Read Project](#)
- + [The Reading League](#)
- + [Sold a Story Podcast](#)



33

# Author & Editorial Advisory Board Biographies

## Dr. Jasmine Rogers

Dr. Jasmine Rogers is a Manager and Coach with the In Schools program at the DC Reading Clinic, a clinical reading practicum program with the District of Columbia Public Schools. In this role, she facilitates professional development on structured literacy best practices and coaches teachers as they apply their learning to their small-group instructional practice. In addition, she is passionate about supporting teachers as they work to provide comprehensive literacy instruction to struggling readers. Before this role, she was an elementary school teacher for nine years in various positions, including teaching Kindergarten, Special Education (Self-Contained and Resource/Inclusion), and serving as a Reading Specialist. As a teacher, she served as a mentor at the DC Reading Clinic from its inaugural cohort in 2019 until she departed the classroom in 2022.

A proud HBCU graduate, Jasmine earned her B.S. in Marketing and M.S. in Sport Administration from Delaware State

University. She also obtained master's degrees in Elementary Education and Special Education from Lesley University. Currently, Jasmine is an Early Literacy Intervention Lead at American University, where she earned her EdD in Education Policy and Leadership within the Early Literacy Cohort. Her research focuses on the intersection of Black Language and best practices for structured literacy instruction, working to help teachers develop linguistically and culturally responsive teaching environments as they teach foundational literacy skills. She also works as an Adjunct Instructor, teaching a Foundations of Reading course to students in the Teacher Education Master's program at American University. Dr. Rogeris also on the board of directors for TriThrift, a non-profit that seeks to allow everyone to compete in the sport by reducing common barriers that currently exist in the sport of triathlon. In her free time, she enjoys competing in triathlons, spending time with her 5-year-old nephew, and singing karaoke.

## Dr. Phelton Moss

Dr. Phelton Cortez Moss is the Director of the Anti-Racist Administration, Supervision, and Leadership Program, Senior Professorial Lecturer of Education Policy & Leadership, and an Inclusive Pedagogy Fellow in the Center for Teaching, Research, and Learning at American University. He is also an adjunct in the Education Transformation Program at Georgetown University.

He has also served as a Senior Policy Adviser to Congresswoman Frederica Wilson (FL-24) who served as Chair of the Congressional Higher Education and Workforce Investment Subcommittee & senior member of the House Education & Labor Committee. He also served as the congressional liaison to the US Commission on the Social Status of Black Men & Boys. Prior he served as Tenure-Track Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Tougaloo College and Senior Leader at the Mississippi Department of Education.

He has served as an Education Policy Fellow for Education Leaders of Color and the National Association for the Advanced of Colored People (NAACP) where he provided strategic and policy advice across a range of national education issues for members, including early childhood, K-12, postsecondary, higher education, career, and technical education, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), statewide literacy policies, teacher diversity, and workforce development. Notably, he led the filing of the historic American Teacher Act to establish a federal grant program to incentivize states to raise teacher salaries. In addition, His research focus is focused on building school and district

leaders capacity to diversify the educator workforce and improve efforts to increase teacher recruitment and retention. Lastly, he has worked extensively to ensure state's have the infrastructure to support strong literacy outcomes for all children.

He has over twelve years of experience working in education and education policy from English teacher, policy maker, and principal. As the youngest serving principal in MS, his work in moving an underperforming middle school from an F to C in two years led him to become the Bureau Director of Educator Effectiveness and Talent Acquisition at the Mississippi Department of Education working on K-12 education policy issues including teacher diversity, teacher/leader evaluations, teacher recruitment and retention, educator licensure, and issues of inequity in the distribution of effective teachers. Under Dr. Moss' leadership, his school doubled math and literacy proficiency for students in those two years.

Most notably, he led the design and launch of the nation's first state-run teacher residency program with a \$4.5M Kellogg Foundation Grant to address the state's teacher shortage and increase the diversity of the educator workforce in Mississippi. While serving at the Mississippi Department of Education, he completed the year-long national School Systems Leaders Fellowship along with twenty senior education leaders from across the country and received training to become a school systems leader.

As an anti-racist scholar in education policy and leadership focused on building racially just schools, his scholarship has been published widely in venues to

include Equity & Excellence Journal, The Education Planning Journal, Diverse in Education, Inside Higher Education, and Education Week to include a few.

Phelton began his career in education as a high school English teacher in Greenwood, Mississippi, where he was Teacher of the Year for two consecutive years, and corps member of Teach for America. He holds a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from the University of Mississippi and a BA in Public Policy Leadership and English from the University of Mississippi. He holds a certificate in Education Finance from Georgetown University. Phelton is a member of The Reading League National Board of Directors and the He Is Me Institute National Board of Directors. He is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Phelton is also the Founder/CEO of ALL Means ALL Consulting, a consulting firm focused on improving teaching, learning, policy, and research for historically marginalized students.

### **Dr. Gholnecsar (Gholdy) Muhammad**

Dr. Gholnecsar (Gholdy) Muhammad is a Professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has previously served as a classroom teacher, literacy specialist, school district administrator, curriculum director, and school board president. She studies Black historical excellence in education, intending to reframe curriculum and instruction today. Dr. Muhammad's scholarship has appeared in leading academic journals and books. She has also received numerous national awards and is the author of the best-selling book, *Cultivating Genius*:

An Equity Model for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy. She also co-authored *Black girls' Literacies: An Edited Volume*. Her "Culturally and Historically Responsive Education Model" has been adopted across thousands of U.S. schools and districts across Canada.

In 2022, 2023 and 2024, she was named among the top 1% Edu-Scholar Public Influencers due to her impact on policy and practice. She has also received numerous awards from national organizations and universities. She was named the American Educational Research Association Division K Early Career Award and the 2021 NCTE Outstanding Elementary Educator in the English Language Arts. She has led a federal grant with the United States Department of Education to study culturally and historically responsive literacy in STEM classrooms. Her newest book, *Unearthing Joy*, is the sequel to *Cultivating Genius* and provides a practical guide for putting culturally and historically responsive education into curricular practice.

### **Dr. Ocheze Joseph**

Dr. Ocheze Joseph is a proud DC native, and daughter of immigrants, She is passionate about teaching and learning in urban settings. Dr. Joseph has served in several K-12 roles including serving as a reading specialist, an assistant principal, and a Title I principal. She also spent time teaching as a university lecturer at Vanderbilt University and an associate visiting professor at Howard University.

Dr. Joseph has taught courses on Theory and Methods of Reading, Recognizing and Responding to Diverse Learners, Literacy for Diverse and Special Needs, and has led Early Childhood and

Elementary Student Teaching Seminars.

Dr. Joseph's areas of specialization are pre-service teacher development and mentoring, literacy and reading education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and family and community engagement. Her scholarly work focuses on the preparedness of pre-service teachers to teach using best anti-racist pedagogical practices.

Dr. Joseph earned her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and Elementary Education from Lincoln University, a master's degree in Reading Education from Johns Hopkins University, and her doctorate in Leadership Studies from The University of Maryland, College Park.

### **Dr. Eugene Pringle**

Dr. Eugene Pringle, Jr. believes in the power of education and the prime need of sound educational practices and outcomes for students. With a passion for literacy, leadership, teacher preparation, and varied professional development methodologies, his educational tenure has been shaped by and has encompassed each.

Most recently, Dr. Pringle served in the capacity of Director of the School of Education at Bethune-Cookman University. As a teacher education practitioner and researcher, he merged theory, research, and application to prepare students for careers in the K-12 setting. He also served as the department chair for elementary education, reading instructor, taught introductory education courses, and facilitated senior research projects. Prior to this appointment, Dr. Pringle served in multiple capacities in urban school settings. He has served as an English language arts teacher, literacy instructional coach, and assistant principal. Additionally, Dr. Pringle has

delivered professional development and participated in collaborative team efforts to support the implementation of standards-based instruction at the school and district level, developed district-wide secondary ELA curriculum, developed district-wide progress monitoring assessments, and provided support to teams of teachers as a SpringBoard trainer through The College Board.

Through a collaborative approach with faculty, students and school districts, he works to identify critical issues in education, promote efforts to develop systems-based literacy within urban and rural school districts, examine critical trends and issues in teacher preparation programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and examine the Black male leadership pipeline in the K-12 and higher education setting. Dr. Pringle's awards and recognitions include: Bethune-Cookman University Top 40 Under 40, University of Central Florida 2018 30 Under 30 Class, and the International Literacy Association 30 Under 30.

### **Dr. Tanji Reed-Marshall**

Dr. Tanji Reed Marshall earned her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with specializations in English Education and Critical Literacy from Virginia Tech. She has more than 20 years in education, including classroom teaching experience, coaching/supporting teachers and leaders at a district level through many avenues, and supporting educational organizations. Currently, she serves as the principal consultant of educational equity consultancy Liaison Educational Partners where she works to partner with districts, states and organizations to support increasing equitable outcomes for all students.

Most recently, Dr. Marshall served as the Director of P12 practice with the Education Trust in Washington, DC. Her experience in education has created space for her voice to be heard on issues across the nation as a sought after keynote speaker and facilitator, panelist, national and international conference presenter, a thought partner to districts, schools and educational organizations, a co-host of an education equity podcast, and an author; with published articles in magazines and journals, and book chapters. Her ASCD published book, *Understanding Your Instructional Power: Curriculum and Language Decisions to Support Each Student*, was released in February 2023 with more than 2,700 copies sold.

### Kareem Weaver

Kareem Weaver is a Co-Founder and Executive Director of FULCRUM, which partners with stakeholders to improve reading results for students. He is the Oakland NAACP's 2nd Vice President and Chair of its Education Committee; his advocacy is featured in the upcoming film *The Right to Read*. Mr. Weaver previously served as New Leaders' Executive Director of the Western Region and was an award-winning teacher and administrator. He has undergraduate degrees from Morehouse College and a master's in Clinical-Community Psychology from the University of South Carolina. Mr. Weaver believes in the potential of all students, the brotherhood of man, and the importance of service above self. His educational heroine, for literacy instruction, is the late Marva Collins.

## Endnotes

Throughout the film and this guide, you'll see the use of Black Language (BL). Black Language (also known as African American Language, African American English, or Black English) is a rule-governed and systematic language many Black Americans utilize. BL has language structure, vocabulary, and grammar. BL has roots in West African and other African Diaspora languages. In the United States of America, enslaved Africans utilized their various language systems to communicate with one another and the enslavers. Within this communication system, Black people could utilize the enslavers' language in a manner that allowed them to speak openly with one another while in the presence of those who kept them bound.

The continued use of BL demonstrates the genius of Black people in utilizing the language system they were forced into and creating a system of communication that provides a cultural connection between Black Americans. Generations of linguists have documented, researched, and legitimized Black Language. Linguists recognize BL as a rich language with its structure, including phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and historical and literary use. As you engage with the film, consider your beliefs about language.

# THE RIGHT TO READ

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