Investigative news

Impact Report—March 2023

American Public Media's "Sold a Story" podcast sparks a movement to bring the science of reading to schools across the country

Donor support powers Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) and American Public Media's (APM) public service mission making investigative reporting possible. Your generosity enables MPR | APM to uncover stories that raise awareness, trigger debate and prompt positive change via non-partisan, independent, investigative and documentary journalism.

In October of 2022, APM released "Sold a Story," a podcast that investigates how teaching kids to read went so wrong.

Over six episodes, Senior Correspondent Emily Hanford and Reporter Christopher Peak investigate influential authors who have promoted a debunked method for teaching children to read, how business and politics influence education policy, and how those on the front lines — parents and teachers — try to navigate it all. For the project, they interviewed more than 125 people, requested records from nearly 200 school districts and scoured university archives and libraries as far away as New Zealand.

The team had the institutional support to take the time needed to do the story right and the editorial freedom to pursue questions they were curious about, even though they weren't in line with most education journalism. The scale of impact as a result of the production and distribution of their reporting is undeniable.

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IMPACT:

"Sold a Story" has struck a chord with audiences, especially teachers and parents. The podcast has over 3.5 million downloads and cracked the top 10 among all podcasts on the Apple Podcast charts shortly after its release.

More importantly, its reporting is already impacting the way school children in this country learn to read as legislation on reading instruction is changing across the country. As of January 2023, there have been eight recorded instances where APM's reporting was cited as having some level of impact on school- or district-level adoption of scientifically supported reading instruction.

APM will release a bonus episode shortly to highlight the ongoing impact.

Hanford has been reporting on reading instruction in U.S. schools since 2017 as part of APM Reports' Educate documentary and podcast series. She has earned national recognition for her work, has spoken at some of the country's largest education conferences and written pieces for The New York Times. Numerous policymakers, journalists, teachers and parents have credited Hanford's reporting for changing their views of reading instruction.

Here are a few additional examples of impact and dialogue sparked from "Sold a Story":

1. There have been thousands of posts across social media in response — Twitter threads, Reddit forums, Facebook groups, videos on #TeacherTok. On Friday evenings, a group of teachers from across the country have been meeting to discuss what it means for their work in a virtual happy hour.

2. The podcast is recommended listening for Arizona teachers, Georgia school leaders and Ohio Department of Education staff.

3. A Kentucky state legislator cited "Sold a Story" in a proposal to revamp reading instruction, and the podcast has also been cited by policy experts from The Education Trust, Brookings Institution, National Council on Teacher Quality, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, American Enterprise Institute and many more state-based organizations in places like Oklahoma and Alabama.

4. The findings have been cited in subsequent reporting in the Washington Post, The New Yorker, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, Louisville Courier-Journal, The Oregonian, WBEZ Chicago, WUWM Milwaukee, WFAE Charlotte, VPM News, EdSource, New Haven Independent, Voice of San Diego and The Washington Examiner.

5. The Hechinger Report's editor-in-chief, Liz Willen, wrote that the podcast was "sparking anger, questions and concerns" and "ushering in much-needed discussion on what must change to improve the way that U.S. students are taught to read." The Hechinger Report published several open letters in response to the podcast, including a letter signed by 650 teachers and another signed by over 1,500 parent advocates.
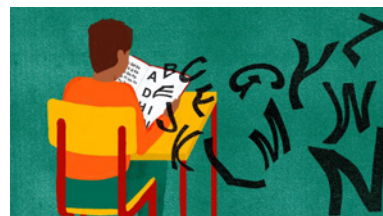
ADDITIONAL COVERAGE:

Can Minnesota schools do better at teaching kids to read?

– MPRR News with Angela Davis, December 22, 2022

Illustration by Rachel Sender for APM Reports

Why Minnesotan kids lag in their reading level and what can be done to help

– MPR News with Angela Davis, December 6, 2022

Photo credit: Emily Hanford for APM Reports

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REACH:

3.5 million
downloads

539,000
average downloads per episode

1.8 million
web pageviews

Reached
number 1
on the Apple Podcast charts
for Society and Culture

Held a spot in the
top 10 overall podcasts
on the Apple Podcast chart

Numbers reported reflect the data through January 2023.

> " *First, what a tremendous service you have provided to children, parents and teachers (and hopefully, teacher educators). And to policy makers, if God willing. Second, you have produced, written and narrated the most thorough, clear and compelling analysis of reading science, reading difficulties and their impact on kids and adults. This is an achievement no one else has ever been able to do. Third, you brought into the sunlight the shortcomings of Reading Recovery, 3-cueing instruction and balanced literacy instruction."*

– G. Reid Lyon, Ph.D., former Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch at NIH

> " *Hard to overstate this point: Journalists rarely delve into the minutiae of instructional practice. We need more, not less, of the in-depth focus @ehanford brought to bear in her outstanding podcast."*

– Twitter post from Dale (@Dale_Chu)

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