



THE GREATEST CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUE OF OUR TIME

The **RIGHT**
TO READ

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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

A classroom wall with a '#READ' sign made of blue paper letters. Above it is a banner of colorful circles numbered 54 to 96. The background shows a classroom with desks and a chair.

#READ

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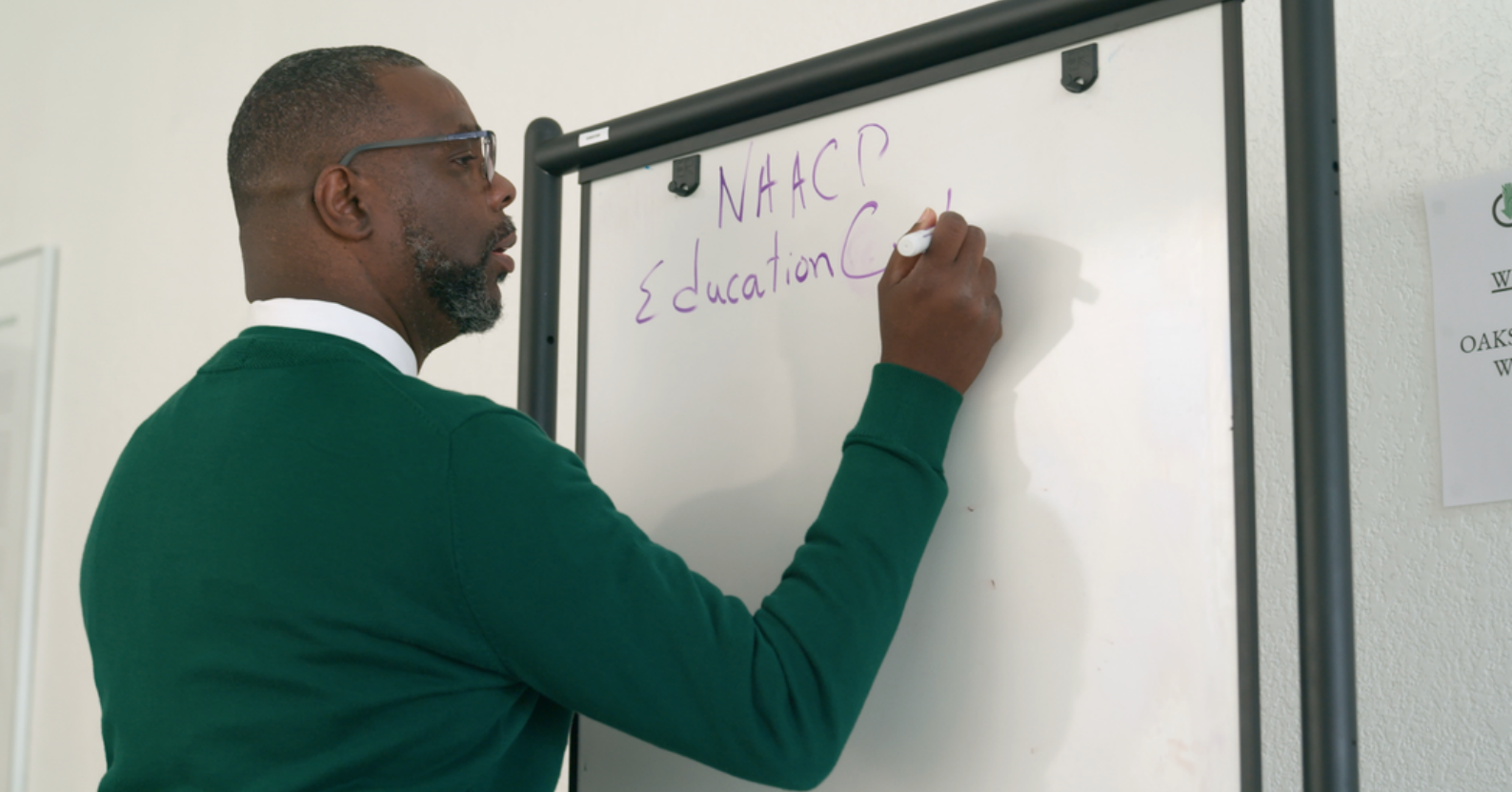
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Introduction

This guide is meant to inspire conversation among audiences after watching the film.

It is designed to be as flexible and adaptable to your discussion groups' level of knowledge on the issue of literacy, the science of reading, and civil rights. Some groups may have no familiarity with the topics and issues presented in the film; other groups may have deep knowledge of the topics and issues presented in the film.

Whatever your group's familiarity and knowledge may be, feel free to use some or all of the discussion guide questions to frame your group's conversation.

This guide includes questions to discuss before viewing the film and specific clips with corresponding questions to discuss after viewing the film. It follows the profiles and stories of title characters we meet in the film:

- Kareem Weaver
- Sabrina Causey
- The Adams-Staples Family—Fred, Melinda, Fred Jr., and Melanie
- The Hunter Family—Isaiah, Ivy, and Theresa

This guide was adapted from a “Clips & Conversations” event hosted by the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Family Literacy Collaborative in November 2022. We are grateful for the inspiration and dedication of CPS Family Literacy Collaborative for modeling important discussions among advocates, community organizers, parents, teachers, literacy experts, and tutors, with the goal of raising awareness and building a shared commitment to improve reading and literacy in their communities.

We are also grateful for the trusted resources developed by [The Reading League](#), [The Right to Read Project](#), and [Sold a Story Podcast](#). This discussion guide draws from their knowledge and tools, which you can access online (See: “Additional Resources” at the end of this guide).

How to Use This Guide

BEFORE SCREENING

In preparation for your discussion, consider how you'd like to organize and optimize your group size for conversation, learn more about the film's background, and get familiar with the title characters of *The Right to Read*. This will help you jump right into discussion following your screening.

HOW TO FACILITATE YOUR DISCUSSION GROUP(S)

For Small Groups (2-6 People), we recommend answering and discussing all questions together. For Larger Groups (6+ People), we recommend breaking up into pairs or groups of 3-4 people at most to discuss questions separately and then coming back to the wider group to share answers, thoughts, and insights before moving on to the next section and film clip.

Takeaways are short descriptions to accompany the film clip you are discussing. Read the takeaway out loud before you introduce the discussion questions.

Discussion Questions are designed to correspond with each clip; however, you can just use the takeaways and discussion guides separately, without re-watching the clip.

If you are leading or facilitating the group discussion, feel free to choose whatever takeaways and questions you feel suit your group profile or come up with your own. You know your group best; tailor the discussion in a way that inspires the most open dialogue and environment for asking questions to advance the issues presented in the film.

ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARY

The Right to Read shares the stories of an activist, a teacher, and two American families who fight to provide our youngest generation with the most foundational indicator of life-long success: the ability to read.

When a child can't read, their chances of incarceration, homelessness, and unemployment increase. That's why Oakland-based NAACP activist Kareem Weaver believes literacy is one of the greatest civil rights issues of our time and is fighting for better reading instruction. "What good is winning the right to vote if we can't even read the ballot?" Fed up with the bleak reading scores in his own community, Kareem files a petition with the Oakland Unified School District demanding change.

For more information about the film and long synopsis, visit [The Right to Read film website](#) and download the [electronic press kit](#).

Who's Who in the Film

As you watch and discuss the film, it may be helpful to refer to these snapshots of the title characters we follow in the documentary.



Kareem Weaver

Kareem is a veteran teacher of fifteen years, a principal and a leader championing students' access to high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). He is also a member of the National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and chair of the Education Committee, which has put forth eight demands of the OUSD to improve and advance literacy in the district.



Sabrina Causey

Ms. Causey is a first-grade teacher in Oakland who was given a reading curriculum that did not work. Attempting to teach children to guess at words and use pictures for clues, she was left with only one student who could read at grade level. Without the district's approval, she worked with Kareem to incorporate a curriculum based in the science of reading. The results were astounding.



The Adams-Staples Family

Fred, Melinda, Fred Jr., and Melanie live in the Mississippi Delta. Though Mississippi has one of the most proven public models for improving literacy in the US, Fred and Melinda make the difficult decision to move to Memphis for more economic opportunities for their family. Melinda signs Fred Jr. up for an educational technology program at the age of 4 that focuses on kindergarten readiness, and is rooted in evidence-based instruction. The family will do anything to ensure their children receive the education they need.



The Hunter Family

Teresa, Isaiah, and Ivy Hunter live in Norfolk, Virginia. Teresa a trainer for the LENA early language program in Virginia Beach that helps set children up for reading success. By focusing on increasing children's vocabularies and the numbers of words spoken in homes, the program helps set children receive foundational tools for early literacy. After graduating from the program with her husband Isaiah and their daughter Ivy, Teresa was inspired to become an early literacy advocate.



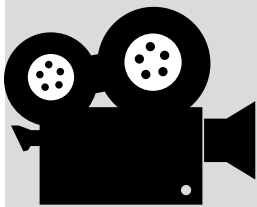
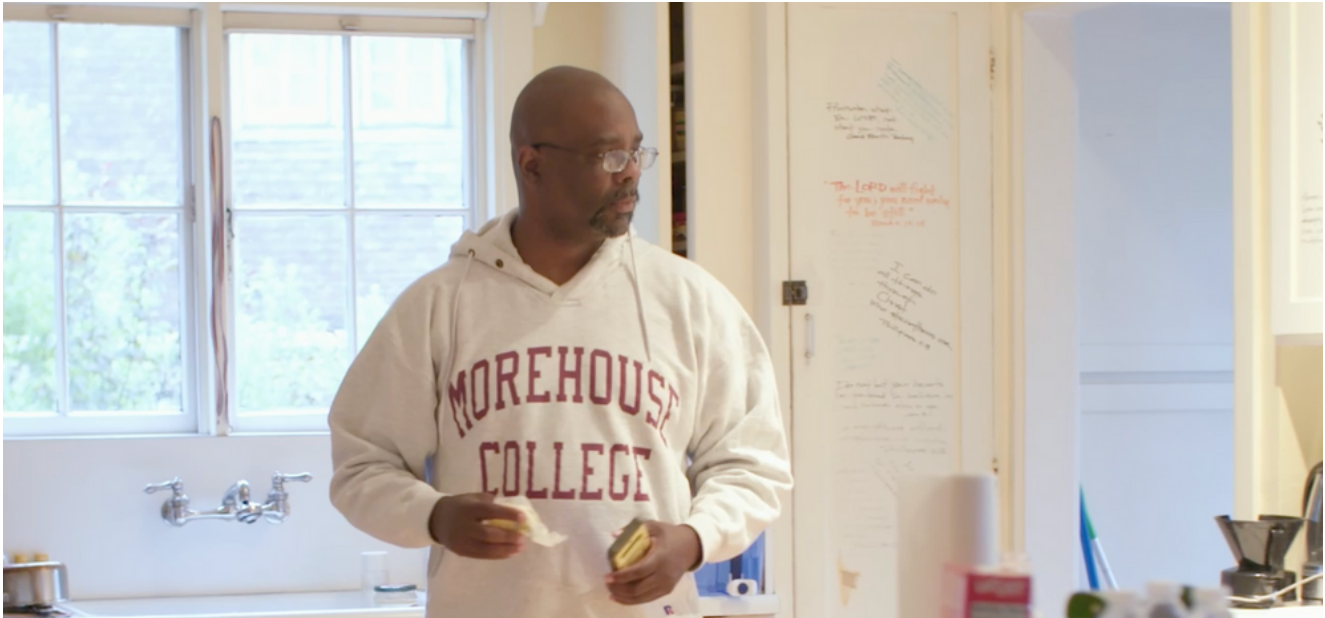
Before Screening

Below are the clips, takeaways, and discussion questions for selected clips from the film that illustrate the main themes and issues of the film. Feel free to go back to the parts of the film to re-watch as a group before reading the corresponding takeaway and introducing the discussion questions.

Questions for the Whole Group

After the credits roll, reconvene the group and open the discussion with these following questions. Prepare your group by orienting them with questions that personalize the film and create a platform for reflection and learning among everyone. The most effective discussions will make space for reflection, new learning, and commitment to taking action that advances and improves the issue in your group's most immediate community.

- What is your initial reaction to the film?
- What are some of the feelings you have in response to the film?
- Did anything surprise you?
- What is one new thing that you learned?
- What questions do you have?



CLIP 1

00:00 - 02:37

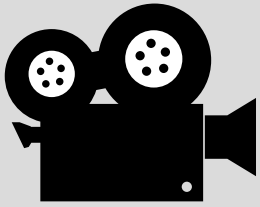
The Information Age

TAKEAWAY: This clip introduces us to the reading crisis in America. The film begins with Kareem making this argument: “Imagine being in the Stone Age and you ain’t got no stone. Imagine being in the Bronze Age, and you ain’t got no bronze. We are in the information Age right now, and you can’t read the information.”



Discussion Questions

- What does Kareem mean when he says this?
- How does the clip present the literacy crisis as not just an issue for all students, but also a crisis about fair and equitable access for some students in the US?
- If we are living in the Information Age, why is reading and literacy so essential for kids to learn?
- Let’s do a gut check. What is your first, internal response to this question: Can all kids learn to read? If you thought, “Yes,” why? If you thought, “No,” why?
- Based on what you learned from the film, how would you explain why so many kids are not learning how to read?



CLIP 2

03:01 - 08:30

Introduction to the US Literacy Crisis

TAKEAWAY: According to the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) study on student achievement in literacy—or the “Nation’s Report Card,” 37% of America’s children were reading below basic level. This statistic includes students of all racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

When you separate this data by race and socio-economic data, [56% of Black 4th graders](#), [50% of Hispanic 4th graders](#), and [57% of American Indian/Alaska Native 4th graders are reading “below basic.”](#) According to NAEP, “below basic” by default and denotes performance that falls below our lowest performance level. In simple terms, reading at “below basic” level means a student cannot read.

The NAEP assessment also measured that [70% of 4th graders, who are identified as students with disabilities, are reading below basic levels. 52% of 4th graders eligible for free and reduced-price lunch are reading below basic levels.](#) Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the Federal poverty level are eligible for free meals.

The NAEP assessment released in 2019 for 12th graders showed that [50% of Black students were leaving high school at below basic reading levels.](#)





**How 'Reading Instruction'
Fails Black And Brown
Children**

Forbes

**Early Education Gaps by Social
Class and Race Start U.S.
Children Out on Unequal
Footing**

**Economic
Policy
Institute**

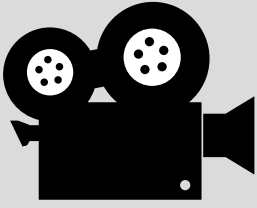
**No systemic racism? Look at student
achievement gaps in reading.**

The Washington Post

Discussion Questions

- Before watching the film, have you heard about the literacy crisis? If so, how did you learn about it?
- Have you experienced the literacy crisis as a national issue or a more local issue? Is this an issue you discuss with other parents, family members or even raised with school administration or local elected officials?
- Have you seen parents get involved in advocacy and literacy reform in your community?
- How do you think parents, teachers, and school administrators work together to begin to address the literacy crisis locally or nationally?
- As Benjamin Heuston, PhD says in the film, the research shows that every child can read with the right instruction. What is happening in your community around using evidence-based reading instruction?

Students from more affluent and well-resourced families have access to supports for remediation and tutoring. How can we ensure that everyone—and especially students in historically underserved and predominantly Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native communities have access to the same supports?



CLIP 3

08:35 - 13:19

Ms. Causey's Classroom

TAKEAWAY: Most schools across the country still use the “Balanced Literacy” approach to reading and writing instruction. Ms. Causey shares her experiences as a brand-new teacher, using Balanced Literacy in her classroom because it was on hand and most easily available at her school.

However, evidence shows that a “Structured Literacy” approach is more effective in teaching reading and writing for all students—in both general and special education populations. In the film, we see that Ms. Causey took the initiative to use a Structured Literacy approach and saw improvements in her students’ learning almost immediately.

You may have heard the term “Science of Reading.” The “Science of Reading” is a colloquial term that distinguishes the Structured Literacy approach for its basis in scientific research and evidence. Though the Science of Reading approach has existed for decades, it has only recently gained attention and now appears in mainstream discussions.

As Margaret Goldberg, a longtime educator and founder of [The Right to Read Project](#) explains, “Though Balanced Literacy was [wrong about some important things](#), it has practices worth saving. And understanding the good in that approach to teaching literacy can help us transition to more effective instruction.”

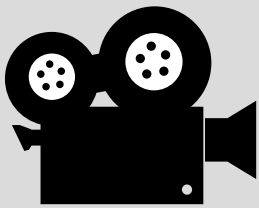
Recent commentary on the “new Reading Wars” position Balanced Literacy and Structured Literacy approaches against each other. The film shows many stories of success achieved in the classroom and home. Kareem, Ms. Causey, The Adams-Staples Family, and The Hunter Family made choices based on what works for their students and children.

For more information on the science of reading, download [The Reading League’s Science of Reading: Defining Guide](#) and from its website.



Discussion Questions

- In the film, we see examples of students receiving instruction in Balanced Literacy and Structured Reading. Have you ever encountered either approach? Where did you encounter it—in the classroom or at home?
- Think back to when you learned how to read. Do you recall what kinds of instruction you received to learn how to read?
- “When we know better, we do better.” Though there are different approaches to literacy instruction, how do you think students should be taught how to read? As a parent, how do you influence what approach is used in the classroom and home? As a teacher, how can you inform your practice in instruction?



CLIP 4

16:30 - 19:18

Talking Improves Vocabulary

TAKEAWAY: A common recommendation for struggling readers is to just read more books to them at home. Sometimes children’s reading development is blamed on a lack of oral language exposure or skills. For parents, it can feel like the problem and solution are mostly found in the household.

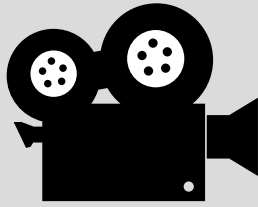
While reading to kids at home and developing oral language skills is critical for their comprehension, that alone won’t teach them how to actually read the words. As we discussed earlier, using the science of reading approach and focusing on ensuring children are gaining exposure to all the five pillars of literacy (Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension) should occur both at home and at school.



Discussion Questions

- What do Teresa and Ivy do when they are at home together? Describe some of their activities that appear in the film.
- How does Teresa interact with Ivy in a way that builds Ivy’s pre-literacy skills?
- What did you notice in the film that relates to Ivy’s growth and development of pre-literacy skills?

For more information on LENA, the program that Ivy was enrolled in for early literacy, visit [their website](#).



CLIP 5

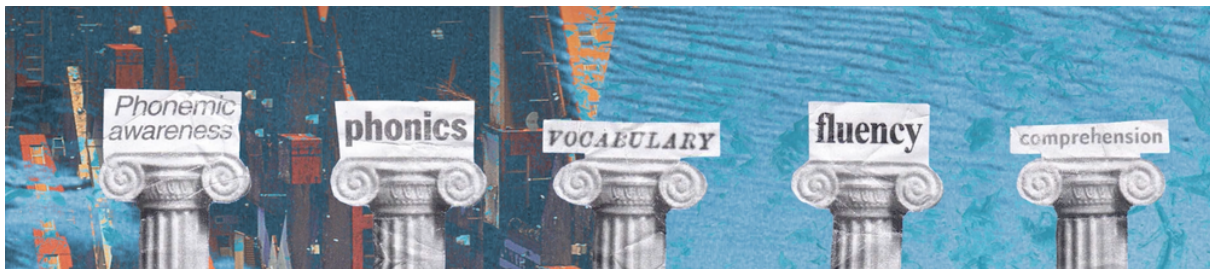
20:47 - 22:32

How Reading Works in the Brain

TAKEAWAY: This clip talks about the five pillars of reading instruction that every child needs to become proficient readers. Learning to read is not a natural process; people are not born with brains wired to read.

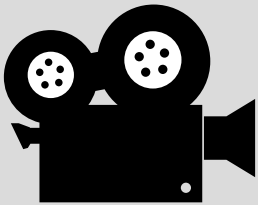
For some children, that process happens without a lot of instruction, which can make it seem like they are becoming literate almost through osmosis. But in fact, the same process is happening in every child's brain. Some need less instruction and practice, but all can benefit from explicit, systematic, and structured instruction that builds on foundational skills.

For information on how to identify what approaches are being used in your child's classroom and school to teach literacy, use [The Reading League's Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines found on its website.](#)



Discussion Questions

- What are the five pillars of reading instruction?
Answer: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension
- Reflect on your own experience reading every day. What does it feel like for you when you read? What are you aware of? Do you have to think about sounding out words and putting letters together? Does it feel like you use the context of what you are reading to figure out what the words are, or what they mean?
- How might how you think reading and literacy is learned affects the way you think children—or your children, learn how to read?



CLIP 6

57:10 - 1:00:56

It Smells Like Freedom

TAKEAWAY: Throughout the film, Kareem emphasizes that literacy is a civil rights issue. As a fundamental skill necessary to succeed in the Information Age, reading, writing, and literacy should be something every person can do at a proficient level or above. If you can't read, you can't access the full benefits of our society.

As we know from decades of scientific research, the reality is that the majority of people can learn to read, but many are not being taught. If we have the tools to teach everyone how to read, everyone should have access to those tools. Civil rights guarantee equal social opportunities and a public education under the law, regardless of race or socio-economic background. High-quality and effective literacy instruction should be guaranteed by a public education in the US for all children.



Discussion Questions

- In this clip, Kareem talks about formerly enslaved people who had been through severe multi-generational trauma and the founding origins of historically black colleges and universities. Why do you think he makes a point to share and highlight this history? What relevance does this history have today?
- What do you think are some of the causes of low literacy or illiteracy for individuals in the US?
- What do you think are some of the impacts of low literacy and illiteracy for our broader society?
- How can everyone be an advocate and ally for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native children in schools?

Conclusion & Closing

By now, you and your group have engaged in a deep, thoughtful discussion about the US literacy crisis, the background on the science of reading and what works, and how literacy is a civil rights issue.

Let's close the discussion by going back to the beginning of it. Let's revisit the original plenary questions we answered all together, with some changes:

- What are some of your feelings about the film and the issues presented in the film?
- Now that we know more, how can we be better?
- What other questions do you have and do you feel like you know where to seek answers for them?
- What is one thing you can do to ensure all children can access high quality and effective instruction in reading and writing?

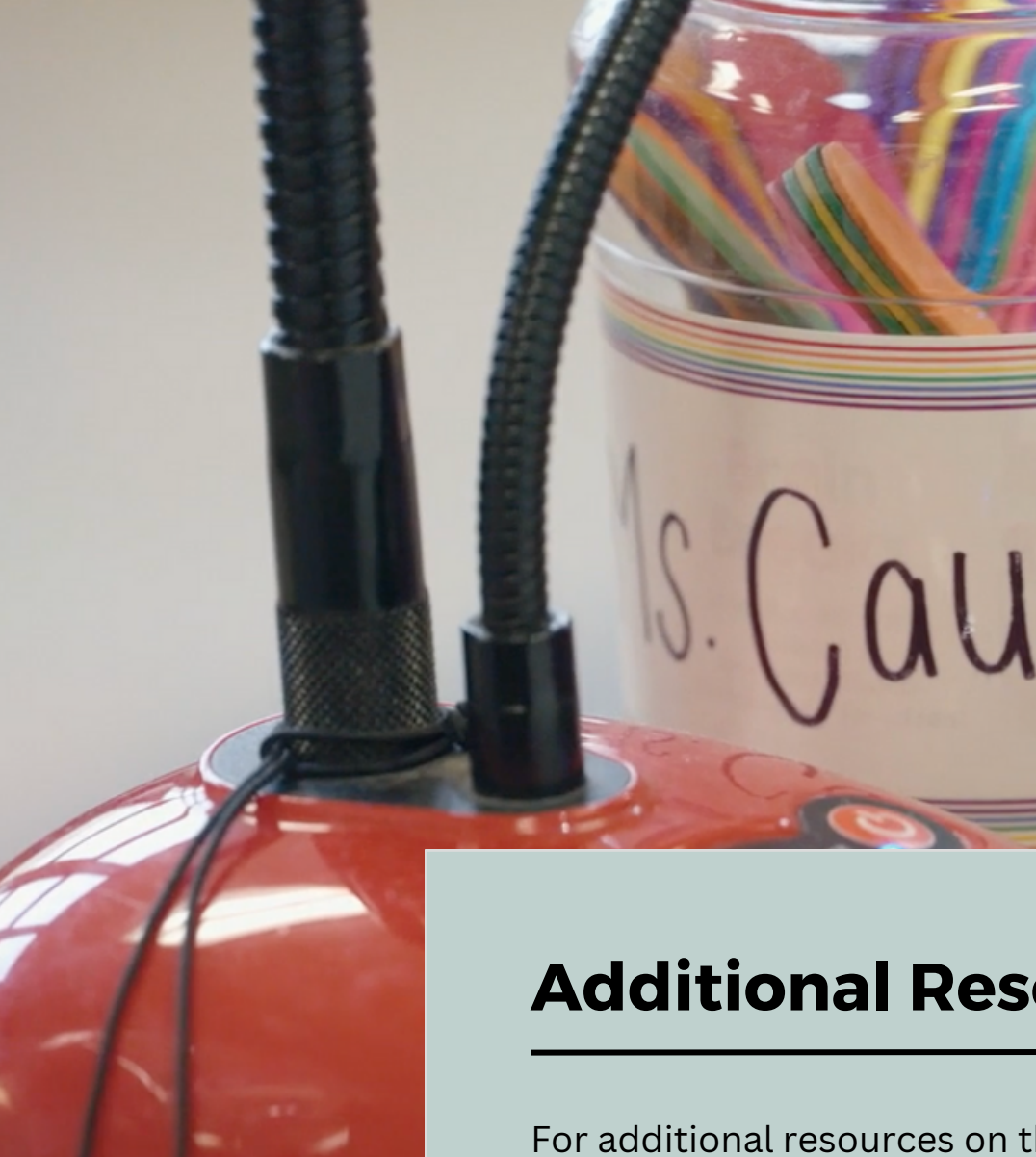
Take Action

Share your new awareness and knowledge on the US literacy crisis with your friends, families, and colleagues by joining the conversation on social media. Follow **#scienceofreading**, **#righttoreadfilm**, and tag **@righttoreadfilm** on Instagram and Twitter.

Screen the film with your friends, families, and colleagues by completing this [form](#).

Starting the conversation on how to change your classroom, school, district, and community's approach to literacy instruction can begin by following the stories of Kareem, Ms. Causey, The Adams-Staples Family, and The Hunter Family.





Additional Resources

For additional resources on the Science of Reading and supports for students with dyslexia, follow the work of:

- [Sold a Story Podcast](#) from American Public Media
- [The Right to Read Project](#)
- [The Reading League](#)
- [Excel in Ed Early Literacy Policy Resources](#)
- [Decoding Dyslexia](#)
- [The International Dyslexia Association](#)