Hard to Read Transcript

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary.

Dayne Guest graduated from high school in 2016. He was working construction but he knew that wasn't what he wanted to do with his life. His options are limited though - because Dayne has a really hard time reading. When he opens a book, he sees:

> **Dayne Guest**: just a whole bunch of words, a whole bunch of letters just lined up.

Ever since he can remember, letters and written words haven't made much sense to him. His mom Pam Guest knew something wasn't right, starting back in kindergarten.

> **Pam Guest**: In the mornings when students came into the classroom, they would write that they'd brought their lunch or that they were going to purchase lunch in the cafeteria. And Dayne always walked right past that board and sat down.

The teachers said he'd catch up. But by the end of first grade, Dayne still wasn't reading. The school said he had to be two grade-levels behind before he could get special education. And there's no way to be two grade levels behind when you're still in first grade. So, Pam hung a blackboard on the wall of her home office, and tried teaching Dayne herself.

> **Pam**: He wasn't learning anything at school, so we spent time every evening teaching him the lessons, teaching him the classwork, teaching him what he hadn't learned during the day. And no matter how much practice we did, he still didn't get it. It didn't make sense.

By second grade, the school acknowledged there was a problem and Dayne started getting special education services for reading.

> **Dayne**: They would take you into a room. There would be like 10 of us maybe. And they would read to you or write for you.

But he never remembers anyone teaching him to read. Instead, he says teachers told him he wasn't trying hard enough. That's what teachers told his mom too.

Pam: They were telling me that he was a smart person, he was entirely capable of doing the work, but he just wasn't applying himself in a way that would help him to become successful academically.

Watching Dayne struggle was eerily familiar. Pam's brother had struggled like this. Never graduated from high school. Ended up addicted to drugs and died. People in Pam's family suspected her brother had dyslexia. He never had formal testing. That can cost thousands of dollars. But Pam kept thinking - maybe Dayne has dyslexia? She figured if he did, though, the school would let her know. It's not like dyslexia is some kind of unknown disorder.

[*Music: "The Cosby Show" theme*]

Theo Huxtable from the Cosby show had dyslexia. Pam used to watch that show.

[***Cosby Show clip***]

Counselor: Theo, I think you should be tested for dyslexia.

Theo: Dyslexia, what's that?

This is the episode where Theo is first diagnosed.

Counselor: He has the brain power. He just has a glitch in the way he takes in information.

Mrs. Huxtable: A glitch?

Counselor: Yes, he just has a problem in the way that he processes language.

This is exactly what seemed to be going on with Dayne.

Pam: So, I asked the teachers if he was dyslexic. I said it. I said the word. "Is he dyslexic?"

And they said "no." It went on like this year after year - Pam suspecting he was dyslexic, the schools saying "no," and Pam believing them because they were the education experts. She didn't know what else to do. And then, when Dayne was a senior in high school, Pam found out about a group called Decoding Dyslexia. It's a network of parents across the country concerned that schools aren't screening kids for dyslexia or giving them appropriate help. Pam learned she had a legal right to demand that her son be tested. The school finally did - Dayne's senior year of high school. The testing report said:

Pam: "Characteristics similar to those of dyslexia" but they would not say that he was dyslexic. And I asked the psychologist why she used that phrasing and

she said she would never say that a student is dyslexic. We don't do that. And I said, "What do you mean you don't do that?" She said it is not in our realm of professionalism to say that a student is dyslexic.

It's as if dyslexia were a bad word, a label that would harm kids. But for Dayne, never getting that label meant never getting the right kind of help. And here's the thing - people with dyslexia can learn to read. There are teaching methods that work. But in American public schools, millions of kids with dyslexia are not getting this kind of teaching.

[*Music*]

From APM Reports, this is "Hard to Read: How American Schools Fail Kids with Dyslexia." I'm Stephen Smith. Scientists estimate that somewhere between 5 and 12 percent of children in the United States have dyslexia. It's the most common learning disability. And yet it's routinely ignored or improperly treated in many public schools. Why? Our correspondent Emily Hanford has been investigating this question for months. Over the next hour, she's going to tell us what she's learned. It's not just a story about dyslexia - this is a story about what's wrong with the way kids are being taught to read in American public schools. She begins with a student named Billy Gibson.

Emily Hanford: When Billy was in elementary school, he couldn't spell his own name.

> **Billy Gibson**: I would have to like ask kids next to me, I'm like, Hi, do you know how to spell William Gibson. And like in first and second grade, kids we looking at me like, you don't know how to spell your own name?

Even "Billy" stumped him.

> **Billy**: And I'd be like B-i-l-e-i. I just would get all the letters backwards and I'd write the y's in the wrong direction. The worst thing for me was figuring out between lower case b and d. I would always get those mixed up and stuff.

He bombed all his spelling tests of course. Here's what he remembers about how his teacher would respond.

> **Billy**: I would be immediately sent out into the hallway of the classroom. After she's done handing out the tests to the rest of the kids the kid with the highest grade in the class would come out. I remember her saying – like see if you can teach this kid how to spell these words.

Billy had no idea he was dyslexic. Neither did his parents. Billy just came to think of himself as the dumb kid who spent a lot of time in the hall.

[*Music*]

We're going to return to the question of how schools deal with kids who have dyslexia. But first - what was going on in Billy's brain? What is dyslexia?

Boy sounding out word: try – vul – trive

Guinevere Eden: So this is a boy who has dyslexia. And he's 11.

That's Guinevere Eden. She's a neuroscientist who studies dyslexia and this is a recording of a child in one of her studies.

Boy: Triv – al – trival – i

Eden: Most children at that age are able to sound out this word. It's not an easy word. Trivialities.

Boys: li tees – trival – i - tees

Guinevere Eden says all babies will naturally start talking unless they have some kind of major cognitive impairment or hearing issue. Our brains are wired for speech. They are not wired to read.

> **Eden**: Nothing in the brain was organized to be reading so when we learn to read we put together a set of brain systems that have properties that allow us to become skilled readers but they weren't actually designed to do that.

In other words, reading doesn't come naturally. We have to learn to read. And there's something about the brains of people with dyslexia that makes learning to read really hard.

> **Milo and Suzanne:** Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

That's our producer Suzanne with her son Milo, who's four. Milo is not dyslexic.

> **Suzanne**: What rhymes with cat?
>
> **Milo**: Mat!
>
> **Suzanne**: What rhymes with jelly?
>
> **Milo**: Deli!

What Milo's doing - rhyming words - requires something called phonemic awareness. That's the ability to notice and manipulate the individual sounds - or phonemes - in spoken words. People with dyslexia have a hard time doing this. Guinevere Eden says this makes it difficult to learn to read because…

> **Eden**: When we see words for the first time, we really try to sound them out. So, we go through them very carefully and try to match the sounds to the letters.

After we sound out a word a few times, our brain stores it in our visual system as a whole word and we know it when we see it. That's how it works if you're not dyslexic. If you are dyslexic, it doesn't come to you the way that sounds and letters correspond. A common perception is that dyslexia is about reversing letters – getting lowercase b's and d's mixed up the way Billy Gibson did. But all beginning readers tend to do this. It's just that many people with dyslexia don't get past the beginning reader stage – unless they get the right kind of help. When they don't get that help, school can be torture.

> **Judy**: want to stay home (*weeping*)

This is Judy. She was in third grade when her mom recorded this.

Maggie Gibson: I can't let you stay home though. We're going to have to go give it a try.

Judy does not want to go to school today. She would refuse to go to school a lot. She even learned to make herself throw up on command - no need to put her finger down her throat says her mom, Maggie Gibson. Maggie's oldest son is Billy. Maggie and her husband Rob have 5 kids, and they all have dyslexia. But they didn't know it at first.

Maggie: We knew something wasn't right.

Rob: You can tell things are off, but you don't know specifically what.

[*Music*]

I talked to parents all over the country and this is the way so many stories about kids with dyslexia begin. The parents know something's wrong, but the school doesn't see it. That's why Maggie recorded Judy – to show the school how miserable her daughter was. Finally, a private tutor one of the Gibson kids was working with

said - you should have him evaluated. The Gibsons decided to pay to have all five kids tested. Here's Rob:

Rob: So, what we did is we kind of set up where we had Gibson day. And so, they evaluated every single kid back-to-back for an entire day.

Results in hand, the Gibsons marched into their kids' school and said, "Look, our children have dyslexia." And according to Rob, this is how the school responded:

Rob: Yeah, we understand this is a test showing abnormalities from a reputed institution that recommends a child with dyslexia have this, that and the other. And, oh, we don't agree with it. And when we go to that disagreement it was almost like we were disagreeing over reality.

Audio of meeting: So our purpose today is to review the educational evaluation by Kennedy Krieger…

This is a recording Rob and Maggie gave me of the meeting where they went over the test results with staff at their son Eddie's school. It's not a great recording but you can hear the disagreement Rob described.

Audio of meeting: He doesn't… we do not suspect a learning disability.

That's one of the school staff saying the school doesn't suspect Eddie has a learning disability despite the private testing results. What the Gibsons wanted for their son is an IEP - an Individualized Education Plan that students with disabilities who are behind in school are supposed to get according to the federal special education law. But the school says Eddie can't have a disability because he has passing grades and average standardized test scores. This is the fight a lot of parents get into with their schools - their kids figure out ways to get by but they're not doing nearly as well as they could if they got specialized instruction. And for years, many public schools refused to acknowledge dyslexia.

Fran Bowman: They would say, "We don't use the word 'dyslexia.'"

This is Fran Bowman. She's a former special education teacher.

Bowman: Because once you open Pandora's box, you have to serve those children.

In other words, if schools acknowledge a kid has dyslexia, they may be legally obligated to provide specialized education. And that's expensive. Special education

directors I talked to denied their schools were refusing to use the word dyslexia to keep kids out of special ed. Whatever the reason, schools not using the word was such a problem that in 2015, the U.S. Department of Education issued a special letter reminding schools that not only *can* they use that word, they should use it if it can help them tailor an appropriate education plan for a student with dyslexia. Because there are effective methods to help people with dyslexia learn to read, first developed back in the 1930s.

Bowman: So, Samuel Orton was a neurologist and psychiatrist.

This is Fran Bowman again.

Bowman: He was seeing a lot of adolescent boys who had all sorts of emotional problems 'cause they couldn't read.

These boys were otherwise perfectly intelligent - they just couldn't make sense of words on the page. Orton paired up with a woman named Anna Gillingham who was an educator and psychologist.

Bowman: What they figured out was that there were children who had to learn to read differently.

They came up with an approach known as Orton-Gillingham - O.G. for short. It's an approach where students are explicitly and systematically taught the ways that sounds and letters correspond. To oversimplify a bit, it's basically heavy-duty phonics.

> **Bowman**: They started working in mostly very fancy private schools. This was not in public school at all, Orton-Gillingham.

Fran Bowman got trained in O.G. in the 1970s and her dream was to bring this approach to kids in public school. She thought her dream would come true when, in 1975, President Ford signed what is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

> **Bowman**: I was teaching college at the time. I can remember, like literally almost the day the law was passed, I remember saying to all of my students, this is so exciting. We're finally going to be able to say, "OK, so you're having trouble with reading and it's the beginning of kindergarten. We can help you."

> **Ben Shifrin**: The intent behind the law was absolutely incredible. And it began to – schools to recognize they needed to do something.

This is Ben Shifrin. He's dyslexic, grew up in the 1960s, got no help for his dyslexia in public school. He says his parents paid $15 a week for an Orton-Gillingham tutor to come to his house. Ben Shifrin eventually got a master's degree in special education and started working in public schools a few years after the special ed law went into effect. He quickly became disillusioned with the law.

> **Shifrin**: I think the thing that has insulted me the most and why I left public ed was when they wanted me to say to parents when I'd look at IEPs and say – we need. Oh, no, no, no. We don't have to provide a Cadillac. We just have to provide a Chevy.

Meaning - public schools don't have the money to give every kid with learning disabilities the best treatment. But it's not just cost that's kept public schools from giving kids with dyslexia what they need. It's a long-running disagreement about how to teach children to read.

> **Bowman**: Oh, the reading wars go way back. They go back hundreds of years.

> [*Music*]

That's Fran Bowman again. The "reading wars" in the U.S. go all the way back to Horace Mann, the father of the public-schools movement. In the 1800s he railed against the idea of teaching kids that letters represent sounds. Mann believed children would better understand what they were reading if they first learned to read whole words. This came to be known as the "whole language" approach as opposed to the phonics approach Fran Bowman learned in her Orton-Gillingham training in the 1970s. She was able to use O.G. in public schools for a while. But she says she soon got a supervisor who told her she wasn't allowed to use it.

> **Bowman**: And this guy said to me, I will never forget it, it's like emblazoned on my brain. He said "d-oo, y-oo, t-a-lk l-ike t-h-is?" I said "No." He said, "Well that's how you're teaching people how to read. You should be teaching them by the entire word, instead of these little sounds."

He was a whole language guy. Whole language was big in the 1980s. Most teacher preparation programs bought into it, and so did most school districts. The basic idea behind whole language is that reading is a natural process. If you expose kids to lots of good books, they will learn to read. But by the 1990s, there was rising panic in America that too many kids were not reading well.

TV News: From the U.S. Department of Education tonight, a report card that no one would be very proud to bring home.

TV News: Reading and writing skills have stagnated.

TV News: The reading skills of American students declined last year for the first time in 20 years.

In response to the news about poor reading skills, Congress created a National Reading Panel to get to the bottom of the debate about how best to teach reading.

Rowson: So, what they decided to do was a mega-analysis on all of the scientifically based research.

This is Andrea Rowson. She trains teachers in how to teach reading. The National Reading Panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies and in 2000, the panel published a report that was a crushing blow to the whole language movement. There was no evidence to show whole language worked and lots of evidence that teaching children the relationship between sounds, letters and spelling patterns improves reading achievement. This is for all kids, not just kids with dyslexia. Andrea Rowson was teaching in public school when the report was released, but she says she didn't learn about the findings until years later. She doesn't think the report changed much of anything about the way schools taught reading.

Rowson: What happens in public education, to be honest, is I think a lot of initiatives come through. A lot of information gets thrown at schools. New regulations, new this, new that. And I think it was just one of those things where they said "OK" and didn't really realize how huge it was.

Rowson works for a school district in Ohio that's made big changes in the way it teaches reading - but not because of the National Reading Panel. Her district changed because a group of parents hired a lawyer and filed a complaint. We'll hear about that later. For now, back to the Gibsons - the family with five dyslexic kids. When the school system refused to give their kids' IEPs, Rob and Maggie Gibson hired a lawyer, too.

Maggie: All we wanted was to secure their right to learn in public school.

At this point their oldest daughter was in high school. Their youngest was in first grade. Billy - who you met earlier - was in middle school. And he was really struggling.

Billy: It just got so overwhelming I would just constantly have these anxiety attacks and it got to a point where I refused to go to school.

Trying to get him the help he needed was turning into a long and contentious process. Rob and Maggie felt that for Billy and his older sister, time was running out. They needed help with reading before they finished high school. So, the Gibsons decided to put them in a private school for students with language-based learning differences. Lucky for them, there's one of these schools not far from their house - the Jemicy school.

Ben Shifrin: OK, I'm going to take you in the theater first…

That's Ben Shifrin – he's the guy who got fed up with public schools because he thought they weren't doing right by kids with learning disabilities. He's the head of Jemicy. It's in Owings Mills, Maryland, just outside of Baltimore. He takes me on a tour.

Shifrin: And this is brand new, the theatre.

The school is beautiful. Modern buildings, student artwork everywhere. Tuition is about $35,000 a year.

Tutor: hi there

Hanford: Hi. Can we come stop in for a minute and observe what you're doing?

Tutor: Sure…

We're in a building with lots of small classrooms. Lower school students get daily tutoring in small groups.

Tutor: So, this is Josie and Christopher.

Hanford: I'm Emily

Tutor: And they are first year students here at Jemicy.

Josie and Christopher are in 5th grade.

Tutor: And they're working on double-vowel O. So, what are the two sounds that "O-O" make? "OO" as in school and "oo" as in book. School and book, think of that.

This tutoring is based on the Orton-Gillingham approach. The philosophy here at Jemicy is intensive reading remediation and a lot of hands-on learning. Students can take geometry in a woodworking shop. But by senior year of high school, students

are in some pretty traditional-looking classes, with lectures and lots of reading. The idea is to prepare them for college.

> **Teacher**: So, if you guys remember, yesterday we left off talking a little about this Rimland thesis. It's the opposite of what Halford Mackinder proposed with the Heartland thesis.

This is 12th grade history at Jemicy.

> **Billy Gibson**: Yeah that was my question - like what was America's and China's relationship?

And that is Billy Gibson. He's about to graduate from Jemicy. Next year he's going to college to study 3-D computer animation. But when he started at Jemicy, Billy wasn't sure he would finish high school.

> **Billy**: I was going in the mindset of like, what's the point? What's the point of doing work? I'm not going to be anything. I've already been told that I'm not going to be anything. I don't have any dreams.

But things turned around for Billy at Jemicy. His mom Maggie noticed the difference right away.

> **Maggie**: You're so used to fight mode. Cause you're fighting for it to be recognized that your kid needs X, Y and Z. And then you go into Jemicy and you have a teacher conference and the teachers sit down and say, "You know, we think your child would benefit from this, this and this and we notice that your child needs," whatever it is. And you're like, "Oh my gosh! We're speaking the same language. We're all noticing the same thing."

But – it cost a total of more than $60,000 a year to send two kids to Jemicy. Maggie and Rob are fortunate – he's a well-paid physician and they got financial help from their kids' grandparents. But five private school tuitions weren't in their budget. So, they kept fighting with the public schools to try to get their younger kids better help. Getting what you need for a kid with dyslexia is a rich man's game, says Maggie Gibson.

> **Maggie**: It is a rich man's game. And the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

> [*Music*]

Maggie and Rob eventually got the school system to pay for two of their younger kids to go to private school. They don't think they would have gotten that if they hadn't hired an attorney. They estimate their family has spent more than $350,000 - including legal fees, private tutoring and tuition.

> **Maggie**: We've taken out mortgages on the house. We have credit card debt that is astronomical. And, we're fortunate enough to have family members that, you know, help. But - what does a normal person do, that doesn't have the luxury of other people to help them? What do you do?

When kids with learning disabilities don't get the help they need, things often don't turn out well. Nearly twenty percent of students with learning disabilities drop out of high school. More than half end up involved with the criminal justice system. I wondered what school systems have to say about kids with dyslexia who aren't getting proper help. So I went to the people in charge of special education and reading instruction for the school system where the Gibson kids went - the Baltimore County Public Schools.

> **Megan Shay**: I'm Megan Shay, director of English Language Arts.
>
> **Rebecca Rider**: Rebecca Rider, director of special education

Rebecca Rider and Megan Shay are both relatively new to their positions. And they acknowledge the school system has a problem when it comes to kids with dyslexia. It's something they say they're beginning to fix.

> **Rider**: We need to do better.

That's Rebecca Rider. Here's Megan Shay.

> **Shay**: This is big. We need to do more for reading in this county. We have multiple data points that say that this is an issue.

One alarming data point - the Baltimore County Schools are paying nearly $40 million a year to send kids with disabilities to specialized private schools. The school system couldn't say how much of that is being spent on kids with dyslexia, but a lawyer told me the costs have been rising. He said that's because the school system is identifying more kids with dyslexia and the schools don't have teachers trained to provide the appropriate help. Until recently, Orton-Gillingham tutoring was not an option in the Baltimore County Public Schools. But last year, the school system started training teachers in O.G. Megan Shay says the goal is to have at least one O.G.-trained teacher in every elementary and middle school. In addition, she says:

Shay: We need to train all of our teachers to be better teachers of reading.

[*Music*]

Megan Shay says colleges of education are not teaching teachers how to teach kids to read. She points to the fact that only half of third graders in the county schools are reading on grade level. Nationally, only 36 percent of 4th graders are proficient in reading. Baltimore County recently started training all of its primary school teachers in the science of effective reading instruction. What's prompting the Baltimore County schools to make all these changes now? Megan Shay says it has a lot to do with parent advocacy. In Baltimore County and across the country, parents of kids with dyslexia have been pushing for change. One of those parent advocates is Pam Guest, Dayne's mother. Dayne also went to Baltimore County Public Schools.

Guest: Ah, up here… So oh these boxes are…

We're in Pam Guest's home office and she's pointing to boxes of paperwork from her years of unsuccessful efforts to get Dayne help in school. At one point, she says she visited a private school for students with learning disabilities. She walked in and

then turned around and walked out because she couldn't quite bear to see what she knew her son couldn't have.

Pam: And I talked to a lot of these upper-class white families who were able to take their kids out and send them to private school. I couldn't afford to do that. But those kids are doing well now, and they're able to go to college. And we didn't have the opportunity.

She says she's determined to change things so what happened to her son won't happen to other kids. She's a leader of Decoding Dyslexia-Maryland. Decoding Dyslexia has chapters in all 50 states. They're pushing for things like universal dyslexia screening and mandatory teacher training. As for Pam's son Dayne, things were pretty bad after he graduated from high school. His friends were going off to college and he was at home, unsure what was next for him. But she says Dayne's doing better now. He found a job as an apprentice helper with the Plumbers and Steamfitters union. His plan is to open his own business someday.

[*Music*]

Stephen Smith: That was correspondent Emily Hanford. You're listening to "Hard to Read," a documentary from APM Reports. I'm Stephen Smith.

Research shows that changing reading instruction to help students with dyslexia would help ALL kids learn to read better. Up next, we visit the Ohio school district Emily mentioned where a group of parents hired a lawyer in response to the way their kids were being taught.

> **Emily Long**: The way I was "taught" - in quotes - to read was to look at the words on the page and to guess based on the picture that was next to them.

We have more about this documentary on our website, APMReports.org. There's an interview with Guinevere Eden on what scientists are learning about reading and the brain. And we have several podcast episodes about dyslexia.

This documentary is available as a podcast too. Go to educatepodcast.org to subscribe.

We'd love to hear from you. Send an email to contact@apmreports.org. Or find us on social media.

Support for APM Reports comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

We’re going to head straight to Upper Arlington, Ohio – a suburb of Columbus. The Trinoskey family recently bought a house in Upper Arlington. And our correspondent Emily Hanford takes us there.

> **Girl**: Oh sorry I just wanted to keep them…
>
> **Kelli Trinoskey:** We’re now collecting rocks in our mailbox, OK…

Emily Hanford: Kelli Trinoskey just picked her twin daughters up from school, and now they’re arriving home. Tess and Mollie are 12. They’re in 6th grade.

> [*Sounds of door opening, family greeting the dog*]

That’s their dog Macy. Macy is officially Tess’s dog. She was a gift from her parents a couple of years ago when Tess was miserable in school.

> **Kelli**: Something for her to look forward to after school. Right? Somebody to cuddle with, chase skunks with….

The Trinoskey family used to live in another Columbus suburb. But Kelli says her daughters weren’t getting what they needed in the public schools. It’s the same

story I heard from so many parents. Something was off with their kid, they didn't know what, and the school wasn't helping. The Trinoskeys eventually paid for their own testing - discovered Mollie has dyslexia and Tess has an audio processing disorder that results in similar struggles with reading and spelling.

[*Sound of walking up steps*]

Kelli: getting on your tour guide hat?)

Tess and Mollie show me their new house.

Tess: This is my room. It has a bunch of horse stuff....

That's Tess.

Hanford: So how does this house compare to your old house?

Mollie: It's a lot smaller.

And that's Mollie.

Kelli: Yup, it is.

Mollie: Very basic.

Kelli: Yeah, it's pretty basic.

The Trinoskeys were willing to trade down to afford a home in this affluent suburb because Upper Arlington is known around here for doing a really good job with kids who have learning disabilities, especially dyslexia.

Kelli: They get it, and it's just unbelievable.

Within days of starting school here, Mollie was getting one-on-one tutoring from a teacher trained in Orton-Gillingham.

Mollie: It's just like, you're happier when you come home

Tess: I love school.

Kelli is amazed by the changes she sees in her daughters. But things were not always like this in Upper Arlington. The district has been through two big battles with parents who accused the school system of failing to meet the requirements of special education law. One of those cases made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Meet the people who brought that case.

Cameron James: I'm Cameron James and I'm the father of four dyslexic children.

Nancy James: And I'm Nancy James and I'm the mother of four dyslexic children.

Nancy and Cameron started dating in high school in Upper Arlington in the 1960s.

Cameron: When I went to pick her up for our first date, her father Mr. Calderone looked at me and he says, "If you kiss her, you marry her." And I did, and I did. [*Chuckles*]

Nancy and Cameron are both dyslexic. Cameron went to public elementary school in Upper Arlington where he says teachers used the "look, say" method - look at a word, say it. It's a whole language approach, and it didn't work for Cameron. He says he struggled with reading all through school. Nancy was taught to read differently.

Nancy: I started school in first grade at a Catholic school, taught by nuns, and they taught phonics, and by, you know, Christmas of first grade, I could read.

Dyslexia is hereditary. Scientists estimate that if just one parent has dyslexia, their child has a 40 percent chance of having it too.

> **Cameron reading letter**: Dear Dr. Schafer….

This is Cameron reading a letter he wrote to the superintendent of the Upper Arlington Schools in 1996.

> **Cameron reading letter:** Words can never describe how proud I am to be the father of Joseph Albert James…

Cameron can read, but it typically takes a lot of effort. He says for him, reading a newspaper article is like someone without dyslexia reading their mortgage. But this letter isn't hard for him because he's read it many times. It describes the ordeal he and his wife went through trying to get the Upper Arlington schools to help their son Joe with his dyslexia. Of all their kids, Joe's dyslexia was the most severe.

> **Cameron reading letter**: Joe's skills fell further and further behind those of his peers. He was a little boy with almost no friends. He refused to go to the shopping center with some boys once because he couldn't read the menu board in the restaurant in the food court…

By the time Joe was in 4th grade, his parents had given up hope that the Upper Arlington schools would teach him to read. So, they put Joe in a private school for students with reading disabilities. This letter was their request for the Upper Arlington schools to reimburse them for tuition. Federal law requires public schools to provide children with disabilities a free and appropriate education. Since Joe's education was not appropriate in the James's view - and getting him an appropriate education was not free - they wanted the school district to pay for it.

> **Cameron continues reading letter**: I have invested in excess of $150,000 in Joe's education. This letter is to request a due process hearing ...

Their case was at first dismissed on a technical issue about whether they could seek reimbursement.

> **Cameron reading letter**: Respectfully, Cameron James.

But they appealed and eventually got to the Sixth Circuit which ruled the Jameses had a right to trial. Then the school system appealed, so the case went to the U.S. Supreme Court - and the high court let the lower court ruling stand - meaning the Jameses could go to trial. They started preparing.

Nancy: We were in the middle of depositions and I had some health issues and a significant death in my family and it just kept getting drawn out and more difficult and Pete Wright....

Pete Wright was their lawyer.

Nancy: ...said let's do something else so we came up with the settlement.

[*Music*]

The settlement is supposed to be confidential, but APM Reports got a copy of it through a records request. It shows the Jameses did not get a single cent to reimburse them for Joe's tuition. What they agreed to instead was for the school system to train teachers in Orton-Gillingham and similar methods. The Upper Arlington Board of Education admitted no wrongdoing but agreed to appropriate $60,000 a year for five years for teacher training. Records show the school district did train two teachers in O.G. But the district didn't change the way kids were being taught to read.

Gayle Long: My kids would come home and say, "Hey mom, I can read this book with my eyes closed."

This is Gayle Long. Her kids were in elementary school after the Upper Arlington schools went through the battle with the James family. She says her kids were memorizing books rather than being taught to read them. This is her daughter Emily.

> **Emily Long**: The way I was "taught" - in quotes - to read was to look at the words on the page and to guess based on the picture that was next to them.

Emily, and her three younger siblings all have dyslexia. They went to the same elementary school Joe James had gone to. So did Christine Beattie's =son Neil ...

> **Christine Beattie**: They wouldn't acknowledge that he had a problem. They wouldn't say the word dyslexia.

I wanted to question the people in charge at the time but both the superintendent and the director of special education have retired. I tried to get interviews. The former superintendent declined and the former special ed director didn't respond. I *was* able to talk to Joe Keith, who was the psychologist in charge of testing students for learning disabilities at the school where Emily, and Neil went. I asked him why

parents were having a hard time getting their kids identified with dyslexia and getting them appropriate help. Here's what he said:

> **Joe Keith**: A lot of the complaints you hear about schools - well they're public schools and they only have so much. Knowing how many reading specialists you have, how many intervention or tutors that you have, you know, it's not an endless supply.

I pushed him to be more specific. I wanted to know if the Upper Arlington Schools were refusing to acknowledge dyslexia so they didn't have to provide specialized education.

Hanford: Were you facing pressure from above you to limit what you could give?

Keith: Probably not a conversation to be had here.

Hanford: So, no, no comment?

Keith: That would be no comment, yes.

What Joe Keith will say is that the school district was wedded to the whole-language approach when it comes to teaching reading. The district did have the two O.G.-trained teachers - but there were close to 6,000 students in the Upper Arlington

public schools. If between five and 12 percent of children have dyslexia, that could be more than 700 kids. There's no way two teachers could meet the needs of that many students. Gayle Long - Emily's mom - says she felt like she was in an alternate universe when she would say her kids needed different reading instruction and school staff wouldn't even acknowledge her kids had dyslexia. She didn't know what to do. Then one day, sitting in her family room with her laptop out, she typed "dyslexia" and "Upper Arlington" into Google. And…

Long: All of these hits come up with a family named the James family.

One of the links was to that letter Cameron James had written about his son Joe.

Long: And as I started reading it, it all came together. Upper Arlington knew. They all knew. And they let my children suffer!

Gayle Long decided she was going to do something. She asked her kids: "Who are the other students struggling with reading in school?" She got in touch with their parents. And in August of 2010, she invited them to a meeting at her house.

Brett Tingley: And we kind of all went around the room.

This is Brett Tingley.

> **Tingley**: Everyone had experienced the same thing.

Their dyslexic kids were not being identified or given appropriate help. The parents decided to work together as a team. They ended up filing a group complaint against the school system - kind of like a class action. It wasn't a lawsuit, but they did hire a lawyer.

> **Kerry Agins**: I was not surprised that there was a group of students with dyslexia that were not getting the kind of instruction that they really needed.

This is their lawyer, Kerry Agins. She's helped a number of parents of kids with dyslexia file complaints against their school districts. She says parents typically fight special education cases alone, seeking remedies one-by-one. Group complaints are rare.

> **Agins**: It is very difficult when you have a law like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to find an issue that is systemic in nature.

But she thinks public schools failing to address the needs of kids with dyslexia is a systemic issue. She urged the Upper Arlington parents to file a complaint with the state. One benefit of a state complaint over going to court the way the James family did? State complaint decisions get posted on a website for everyone to see. There would be no secret settlements. If the parents won, it could send a message to other public school districts – change what you're doing when it comes to your students with dyslexia. Nineteen people signed the Upper Arlington complaint. In August of 2011 the state issued its findings. The parents won.

[*Music*]

Beattie: We felt vindicated.

This is Christine Beattie again.

Beattie: Like, we aren't crazy. We know what we're talking about.

The Ohio Department of Education found the Upper Arlington schools in violation of the law when it came to promptly and properly identifying students with learning disabilities and finding them eligible for special education services. The state issued a letter that included a list of corrective actions the school system had to take.

That's how Mollie - the twin you met earlier - ultimately ended up in Orton-Gillingham tutoring at Jones Middle School in Upper Arlington.

Michele Joubert: OK, let's do our phonogram drill. Ready?

Mollie: OO – wait ah oh—

Joubert: Right, do the long and the short vowel.

Mollie: Uh oo, in oo. AA ay...

We're in a small room. Mollie is working one-on-one with teacher Michele Joubert.

Joubert: "OO" school – school and book

As you heard in the first part of the program, if you have dyslexia your brain has a hard time understanding the ways that sounds and letters correspond. You have to be explicitly taught the way language works.

Joubert: So, show me the sounds in "crack?"

Mollie: C-r-ack

Joubert: Awesome...

Mollie is counting out the sounds with little blue blocks. Orton-Gillingham is what's known as a multi-sensory approach, meaning that as students learn they use

tangible items such as blocks. The idea is the more senses you use when learning something – hearing *and* seeing *and* touching - the better you learn it. There's something about activating multiple senses that helps carve new learning into the brain. Listen to how Mollie is able to put it all together when she reads:

> **Mollie**: English people came to North America for a new life. They found a new land with people living on it…

Mollie still stumbles sometimes over a word. But she can sound it out - with a little help…

> **Mollie**: Jamestown was the first permanent – permanent English colony.

Mollie will always have dyslexia. There's no cure. But neuroscience research shows that good intervention can actually change people's brains - the earlier the intervention, the better. O.G. tutoring is not something the state of Ohio required the Upper Arlington schools to invest in. But more O.G.-trained teachers is something parents pushed for after the complaint decision – and in 2012, the district hired a new director of special education who was open to the parents' ideas. His name is Kevin Gorman.

Kevin Gorman: They gave me…

He pulls out a piece of paper.

Gorman: …This – as what their criteria was of where they were hoping to go.

It's a list of things the parents wanted the Upper Arlington schools to do. They handed it to Kevin Gorman his first week on the job. He agreed to a meeting with them having no idea who they were.

Gorman: And I could see that they weren't a happy group initially but that they really had a cause and they were passionate about it.

The parents were emboldened by their win. In addition to more O.G tutoring, they wanted every kindergartener - and all new students entering the district - screened for dyslexia. The district now does that. The parents also wanted the district to change the way it teaches ALL kids to read. The district has done that too.

Teacher: Now we're going to try some other sounds… Let's start with this one…

This is a class of first and second graders at Barrington Elementary School in Upper Arlington.

> **Teacher**: c-k – sock – ck
>
> **Kids**: c-k – sock – kkkkkhh
>
> **Teacher**: What is CK?
>
> **Student**: A digraph.
>
> **Teacher**: A digraph!

A digraph is two letters that appear together but make just one sound.

> **Kids**: W-H whistle – wha
>
> **Teacher**: Who can tell me: what's the big difference between these two digraphs?

A little hand shoots up. Jacob.

> **Jacob**: So the "CK" can only go at the end and the "WH" can only go at the beginning.

What Jacob said is "CK" can only go at the end of a word and "WH" can only go at the beginning. There are some words where "CK" comes in the middle, like "chicken," but these kids haven't learned that yet. English gets a bad rap for being a language full of exceptions, but in fact the vast majority of words follow set rules and patterns. A tricky thing for kids learning to read, though, is that some of our most common words are the exceptions, words where the letter sound correspondence is whacky. Like "the" and "because" and "school." The kids in this class work on memorizing those trick words.

Kids and teacher: School – s-c-h-o-o-l – school!

You may think this lesson sounds kind of rote and traditional. One reason the so-called "reading wars" have been so intense is they're political - with phonics being cast as a conservative approach and whole language as the more liberal, progressive way. What's interesting at Barrington Elementary is that parents here can choose to put their kids in a "progressive" classroom where there's lots of play and hands-on learning. But all kids in the Upper Arlington public schools are taught to read the way you just heard. The class we were in? That is the progressive class.

[*Music*]

What would it take for other school districts to do what Upper Arlington did? The biggest thing is probably teacher training. Because many teachers are coming out of teacher preparation programs without knowing how to teach kids to read.

> **Rowson**: We learned a lot about, you know, creating a literature-rich environment, things like that.

This is Andrea Rowson again - the one who trains teachers in Upper Arlington. When she studied to be a teacher back in the 1980s, she says she learned nothing about phonics. In fact, professors were against it. It wasn't until she got Orton-Gillingham training that she learned how to teach kids to read. Amelia Smith got *her* teaching degree more recently.

> **Amelia Smith**: When it comes to phonics, we weren't taught how to teach it. We knew what it was but not how to teach it and that there's a specific sequence in how it should be taught.

Back in 2000, the National Reading Panel identified phonics as one of five key components of effective reading instruction. Ten years later, the U.S. Department of Education decided to find out if people coming out of teacher preparation programs were learning all five components. The answer, for the most part, was no. And last

year, the National Council on Teacher Quality, a think tank in DC, analyzed syllabi from undergraduate elementary teacher preparation programs and found that most of them still don't cover all 5 components of effective reading instruction. Jule McCombs-Tolis says teacher preparation programs have resisted the findings of the National Reading Panel because there's still an ideological fight going on about whole language versus phonics.

Jule McCombes-Tolis: The division in higher ed in reading is alive and well.

She's worked in teacher preparation for close to two decades and says many of her colleagues don't believe that kids need systematic, explicit reading instruction. Instead, in the wake of the Reading Panel report, many teacher educators promoted the idea of "balanced literacy."

Tim Shanahan: Balanced literacy began as the notion of a different attempt to try to settle the reading wars. It's supposed to be the best of both worlds.

Balanced literacy is basically whole language with some phonics mixed in, says Tim Shanahan. He's a literacy expert. He says the problem with balanced literacy is that it combines a whole bunch of things that don't work with a little bit of what does work and that's not good reading instruction. He thinks many instructors in teacher

prep programs just don't know the reading science that well. An instructor might be a PhD who's up on the latest research…

> **Shanahan**: On the other end, you could have somebody who, essentially, we need somebody to teach this, this person teaches you know four other things for us and we'll give 'em an extra course in reading instruction. You know they have last year's syllabus and they do their best.

He says part of the problem is there are thousands of teacher preparation programs in the United States and very little oversight. Faculty members typically decide what gets taught. There is no one authority, no person to hold accountable for how teachers in America are being trained. States do have *some* power and several are trying to exert more control. Some states have passed laws that require graduates of teacher preparation programs to pass science of reading tests before they get licensed. Other states have passed laws that require graduates of teacher preparation programs to pass science of reading tests before they get licensed. Teachers need to know the reading research, says Andrea Rowson - because when they don't, kids suffer and so do teachers. I asked Andrea what teaching kids to read was like before she knew the research.

Hanford: Do you remember feeling I don't know what I'm doing, like, I don't know how to help this kid?

Rowson: Every single day of my career. Yes. Yes. It was demoralizing. You felt so guilty and so bad because you were doing everything you could. It's not that people aren't working hard. People are trying everything that they were told to do. And it just wasn't working.

[*Music*]

I've come to think of kids with dyslexia as canaries in the coal mine when it comes to how students are being taught to read in American schools. More than 60 percent of 4th graders are not proficient readers. Some of those students are kids with dyslexia who are not getting the right kind of reading instruction. But all of those struggling readers would likely do much better if they got the kind of systematic, explicit reading instruction that kids with dyslexia need. Nancy and Cameron James - who went all the way to the Supreme Court fighting for their son Joe - say they see signs that things are improving. They point to what's happened in Upper Arlington, for example, and the fact that some states are starting to take action when it comes to teacher preparation. But the Jameses aren't ready to trust public schools when it comes to teaching kids to read. They still have to think about this – because now they have five young grandchildren.

Nancy James: Our conversations go like this, A, ah, Apple [*laughs*]

Two of the grandkids are already in private Orton-Gillingham tutoring. The James' children are taking no chances when it comes to making sure *their* kids learn to read. Cameron James says all children deserve better reading instruction.

Cameron James: If you want to affect poverty rate, if you want to affect homelessness, if you want to affect our prison population – teach every child to read. We know how to do it. We choose not to. And so that would be my prayer, is that every child would learn to read.

Music & Montage of Kids:

Teacher: A, Apple, AAA!

Kids: A, Apple, AAA!

Milo: Humpty bumpty…

Mollie: "Some of these people were called pilgrims. They arrived in a ship called the Mayflower."

Teacher: I, itch, ih!

Kids: I, itch, ih!

Mollie: "How will I tame the wild mustang, you ask? Well I have done a lot of research. It will take a while, but I will not let you down."

Milo: All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again!

Kids Reading Credits: You've been listening to "Hard to Read." It was produced by Emily Hanford and edited by Catherine Winter. We got research and reporting help from Curtis Gilbert, Josie Fan, Jeffrey Bissoy-Mattis, Josh Marcus and Lila Cherneff. Our web producer is Andy Kruse. Craig Thorson mixes our documentary and Eva Dasher does the fact checking. Special thanks to Chris Julin and Liz Lyon. The APM Reports team includes Chris Worthington, Suzanne Pekow, and Stephen Smith.

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Support for this program comes from Lumina Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

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