

THE RIGHT TO READ

A Jenny Mackenzie Film
Presented By
LEVAR BURTON ENTERTAINMENT
PURE EDGE
and
ARTEMIS RISING FOUNDATION



PREMIERING IN FEBRUARY 2023
at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival

RUN TIME: 80 minutes
Please visit [here](#) for press materials.

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DIRECTED BY: Jenny Mackenzie

PRODUCED BY: Sabi Habib-Lowder, Kareem Jabbar Weaver, Jenny Mackenzie

LOGLINE

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.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

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.

LONG SYNOPSIS

American reading levels have been far below grade-level for decades. In 2022, only one-third of children were reading at proficient levels. When a child doesn't learn to read, their chances of incarceration, homelessness, and high school dropout 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 change.

"What good is winning the right to vote if we can't even read the ballot?"

Schools throughout the nation use reading methods known as "whole language" or "balanced literacy." These methods promote the idea that a child will naturally learn to read overtime and encourage students to rely on context markers like pictures and memorization rather than individual sounds and letters. Unfortunately, they've been proven not to work, but are supported by a billion dollar industry that continues to sell ineffective curricula to thousands of educators who likely have not been taught better.

Kareem knows the solution is simple: teach children how to read using explicit and systematic literacy instruction, often referred to as "structured literacy" or "the science of reading." We have had the research since the 2000, when George Bush called for a National Reading Panel, but people either did not listen or did not hear.

Fed up with the bleak reading scores in his own community, he files an NAACP petition demanding change in Oakland schools' reading curricula. Working with Ms. Causey, a first grade teacher in the lowest performing school, the two go against district mandates to bring in science-based literacy tools to see if they can turn reading scores around.

In Virginia Beach, Teresa and her four-year-old daughter Ivy work on early language—a crucial component of literacy—showing how parents can help children get ready to read at home. In Mississippi, the Adams family explores educational technology to help their son learn to read before his third grade exams. Meanwhile, Kareem furthers his cause by calling out publishing companies that he believes have prioritized profits over student success.

Two years later, the Oakland school board has finally met the top petition demand of implementing a new reading curriculum across the district, and Kareem's work to mobilize national demand for literacy is

taking off. Ms Causey's students have some of the best scores in Oakland, Teresa's daughter Ivy is on track to read, and the Adams family have successfully helped their son achieve above grade-level reading scores. All thanks to explicit and direct reading instruction.

Eighteen out of fifty states now require teacher training in the science of reading. For Kareem, this isn't nearly enough. There needs to be a widespread shift in how America thinks about reading, from policy makers to teachers to parents. This film is a call for educators, policymakers, parents, and anyone who cares about the future of our nation to join the fight for every child's right to read.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Learning to read is personal for me. I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was 14-years-old. Until then, I never understood why I struggled to do what other kids in my class seemed to pick up naturally. My parents provided me with the resources and support necessary to become a good reader, and until making this film, I didn't realize what a great privilege that was.

The Right to Read started in 2018 as a story on pre-literacy, trying to understand why so many children were entering kindergarten without the skills necessary to learn to read. But as our team continued to do more research, we realized there was a bigger issue; **children are not learning to read once they get to school**. Regardless of pre-literacy skills, parental involvement, class, or race, one-third of American third graders were not reading at grade-level in 2019.

Even more shocking than those statistics is the fact that reading scores have been this low for decades, and the reason is simple. **We are not teaching children how to read**, and haven't been for quite some time. Luckily, the public conversation around literacy instruction started to receive attention thanks to investigative journalist Emily Hanford whose reporting on American Public Media asked the simple question, "Why aren't kids being taught to read?"

Following this ground-breaking reporting, our filmmaking team found Oakland NAACP activist and award-winning educator, Kareem Weaver, whose work focuses on how the literacy crisis disproportionately affects Black and Brown students. His message is clear: **literacy is the greatest civil right of our time**. Collaborating with Kareem and documenting his grassroots activism over the past three years became the cornerstone of the film and added necessary context to bring together the two other stories we had been following.

In Mississippi, we followed the Adams-Staples family as they worked to ensure their son Fred Jr. learned to read. They utilized educational technology to develop foundational skills, and moved to Memphis in search of employment to better support their family. In Virginia Beach, we spent time filming Teresa, Isaiah, and their 4-year-old daughter Ivy—who can make anyone laugh—as they worked on early language and pre-literacy skills. I was lucky enough to witness Teresa as she transitioned from parent to advocate, and started training other parents on how to improve their childrens' chances of literacy.

Our team has traveled far and wide to bring stories of the literacy crisis to a nationwide audience. I hope this film will help audiences understand how high stakes this literacy crisis is, and lead them to join the activists, educators, and parents who are working for widespread change. I believe that Kareem's activism, Teresa's advocacy, and the Adams-Staples's determination will inspire others to join the fight to ensure every child is given the right to read.

THE LITERACY CRISIS

“Illiteracy is one of the most solvable issues of our time. We have the research. We have the practice. We have to do what’s best for our children.”

- Dr. Kymyona Burk, Foundation for Excellence in Education

In 2022, [sixty-six percent of children](#) did not meet the standards for reading proficiency set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Unfortunately, this is not new. Even before the pandemic, reading scores hovered around the same dismal percentages for over a decade. Of those two-in-three children not reading proficiently, one-third of them were not able to even read at a “basic” level—the lowest level on the test.

Children who start behind often stay behind. A [study released](#) by the American Educational Research Association found that children not reading by third grade are 4x less likely to graduate high school. [Fifty-four percent](#) of U.S. adults—about 130 million people—are reading below a sixth-grade level, and this does not only impact an individual’s education. When a child doesn’t learn to read, their chances of incarceration and homelessness go up exponentially. Studies estimate that low-literacy levels among U.S. adults could be costing the economy \$2.2 trillion a year.

Despite these dire consequences, the literacy crisis is often ignored despite being one of the most solvable issues of our time. The issue is not that children simply can’t read or that some are born better readers than others, it is that the majority of American public schools are not effectively teaching children how to read. Instead, they are using curriculums and teaching dogma rooted in literacy methods proven not to work.

How a person learns to read is one of the most researched questions of the past fifty years. Unlike language, most children do not “naturally” learn to read, where they pick it up simply by being around it. Evidence shows that the majority of children require explicit instruction in how to learn to read. Surrounding a child with books is not enough to instill a love of literature; first, they must learn how to read individual words by understanding sounds, and then the blending of sounds. To do this, a teacher must instruct them systematically in how to recognize sounds and letters to decode words.

If it’s that simple, then why aren’t children being taught to read? It would be too easy to blame teachers or districts for low reading scores—or perhaps a pandemic—but the early reading crisis has been here for decades. The cause of it comes down to deep ideological differences amongst curriculum publishers and education leaders that goes all back to the 1950s. At one point, the argument was so heated it became known as the “reading wars.”

Some educators advocated for an approach that called for the memorization of whole words and the use of context clues, like pictures, to teach a child to read. Others argued for explicit instruction on how different letters and sounds could be turned into words, often known as phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding.

In 2000, after years of debate, the National Reading Panel was assembled to create a definitive guide for how children learn to read. The research showed that the majority of children benefit from a more explicit and systematic approach to reading, which came to be known as “structured literacy” or, recently, “the science of reading.” Unfortunately, by and large, the approach that advocated for cues and memorization won out and a billion-dollar publishing industry—along with hundreds of influential careers—were built upon a method of teaching reading that was proven to not work for many children.

LITERACY & CIVIL RIGHTS

“Once you learn to read, you will forever be free.”

- Frederick Douglass

Decades of low reading scores have left educators and community members with the expectation that, “some kids just won’t learn to read.” Low reading scores in Black and Brown communities have often become the norm. Take Oakland, for example, where only 18.6% of Black children can read on grade level in comparison to 73% of white students. The blame is often placed on “trauma” or “culture,” issues that schools simply cannot fix, but that is not the case. The issue is what Kareem calls the “resource gap.”

Regardless of race or class, children are not learning to read. However, children from affluent households often have the resources to access literacy intervention support that low-income and minority students do not. Nationally, 84% of Black students, 82% of American-Indian students, and 80% of Latino students were [not on track](#) for reading by fourth grade in comparison to 59% of white students. When the majority of children of color are not being taught to read, their ability to actively engage in a democracy plummets, making literacy the “greatest civil right of our time,” according to Kareem.

Kareem is not the first civil rights activist fighting for literacy, both Frederick Douglass and Maya Angelou have spoken on the importance of literacy as a fundamental tool for freedom. The topic has long been racialized, going back as far as 1833 when slave codes explicitly fined anyone who would dare teach any “free person of color or slave” to read or write. Still, freed Black men and women learned to read, further proving that trauma and culture do not determine whether or not someone is capable of learning to read.

With the resources and evidence that we have today, we have the power to build a world where over 90% of children are reading at grade level. The question is: do we have the will to fight for every child’s right to read?

CHARACTER STORIES

Kareem Weaver is an Oakland NAACP activist who believes literacy is our most important civil right. He is fighting for a world where every child is given the chance to learn to read. With a focus on Black and brown children, Kareem demands to bring evidence-based reading instruction to Oakland schools and causes national interest by taking on the publishing industries.

Kareem is a graduate of Morehouse College, and is the 2nd Vice President of the Oakland NAACP and the chair of the Education Committee. You can learn more about Kareem’s work and his non-profit FULCRUM (Full and Complete Reading is a Universal Mandate) [here](#).

Sabrina Causey is an Oakland first-grade teacher 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.

Melinda and Fred Adams met in Jackson, Mississippi and moved to the Delta with their two children. They worry about **Fred Jr.’s** education given that only 21% of children can read at grade level in their district.

Melinda signs Fred Jr. up for an educational technology program 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.

Teresa Hunter is 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. Teresa is hoping to re-enroll in college and get her degree in early childhood education once Ivy starts school.

TEAM BIOS

Jenny Mackenzie: Director

Jenny is a documentary filmmaker who produces films that promote social change. Her films include KICK LIKE A GIRL, WHERE'S HERBIE? SUGAR BABIES, LEAD WITH LOVE, DYING IN VEIN, THE OPIATE GENERATION and the 2018 Sundance & Emmy-award winning film QUIET HEROES. Her most recent film, THE RIGHT TO READ will be available in spring of 2023.

Jenny's films have aired on top broadcast and VOD channels such as HBO, HULU, PBS, and Amazon, and have received praise in the New York Times, the Washington Post and Variety. Her films have received grant support from Chicken & Egg Films, Artemis Rising Foundation, The Sorenson Legacy Foundation, Fledgling Fund, The Great Minds Foundation & The Eccles Foundation.

Jenny has a bachelor's degree from Brown University and a Ph.D. from the University of Utah. She has worked in collaboration with the Utah Film Center for over 15 years and is an assistant professor in documentary film production at Utah Valley University.

Kareem Weaver: Producer / Lead Character

Kareem Weaver is a Co-Founder and Executive Director of Full and Complete Reading is a Universal Mandate ([FULCRUM](#)) which partners with various stakeholders to improve reading results for students. He is the Oakland NAACP's Second 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.

Sabi Habib-Lowder: Producer

Sabi Habib-Lowder is an Afghan-American, LA-based producer and writer focused on stories of identity, power, and how we understand our place in the world. She is a recipient of the Utah Film Commission's Next Level Grant, and recently directed a short film on the Bosnian genocide.

She has a BA in communication and cultural studies from Westminster College in Salt Lake City. When she's not researching or writing, she's probably trying to convince her friends to watch reality TV with her.

Yennie Lee: Social Impact Campaign Lead

Yennie brings over ten years of experience in philanthropy, design, social innovation, and storytelling for social change. She has worked at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IDEO.org, and Participant Media

on a range of issues—from improving student success in U.S. education, innovating on new approaches to social impact measurement, solving market failures in the menstrual hygiene space, and building marketing campaigns that galvanize film audiences to take action for social change.

Most recently, at Participant Media, Yennie led social impact campaigns for both narrative and documentary films, including [Dark Waters](#) (Focus Features), [American Utopia](#) (HBO), and [Final Account](#) (Focus Features). She was awarded the [Shorty Social Good Awards' "Best in Entertainment"](#) category for her work on the “Fight Forever Chemicals Campaign” in 2020 and the Bronze Cannes Lions for Good Health and Wellbeing Sustainable Development Goals in 2021.

Yennie holds a BA in Sociology from the University of Chicago and an MBA from the Yale School of Management. As Social Impact Campaign Lead, Yennie is responsible for building *The Right to Read's* partnerships and programming to share the film with parents, teachers, and education leaders across the U.S.

Chelsi Bullard: Editor

Chelsi Bullard is a Memphis-born and New York City-based filmmaker with interests rooted in stories that tackle the human rights issues of our time, with a focus on youth, people of color and debunking inaccurate histories of disenfranchised folk.

She holds an MFA in Social Documentary Filmmaking from School of Visual Arts and a BA in English and Film Studies from Vanderbilt University.

She enjoys making elaborate meals in her tiny kitchen & playing with her cross-eyed kitty, Whiskers.

Danny Schmidt: Cinematographer

Danny Schmidt is an award-winning director, producer, and cinematographer of non-fiction television, documentaries, and web-content.

He has produced, directed, and photographed documentary films for clients including PBS, National Geographic, Netflix, HHMI BioInteractive, NASA, the National Science Foundation, and many others.

He won an NW Emmy award for cinematography for his DP work on the PBS film *Indian Relay* and another for best topical documentary for *Finding Traction* on Netflix.

Jonathan Kirkscey: Composer

Jonathan Kirkscey is a composer, producer, cellist, and guitarist who regularly performs with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and Blueshift Ensemble, of which he is a founding member. A strong background in both classical and popular music has given him a reputation as a very versatile musician.

As a film composer, Jonathan recently scored the documentary "Won't You Be My Neighbor", a film about Fred Rogers which opens in theaters in June of 2018. He also scored "Best of Enemies", directed by Morgan Neville (20 Feet From Stardom) and Robert Gordon, which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival. His score for "Best of Enemies" earned him the International Documentary Association's award for best original music in a documentary feature. Jonathan also composed music for several Netflix original documentary series including "Chelsea Does" and "Abstract: The Art of Design".

CREDITS

With Gratitude to

Kareem Jabbar Weaver
Maro, Jabbar & Dr. Zina Weaver

Teresa Isaiah & Ivy Hunter
Melinda, Fred, Frederick Jr. & Melanie Adams
Sabrina Causey

With Gratitude to

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Dr. Kymyona Burk
Dr. Benjamin Heuston

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Motion Graphics by Leah Nichols

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Kelsie Moore

Peter Braswell

Holly Tuckett

Yuito Kimura

Dominic Desantis

Creative Gallery LLC

Torben Bernhard

Jenny Mackenzie

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Associate Producer

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Jordan Hackney

Assistant Editor Cameron Baer

Colorist Jacob Fenn

Sound Engineer and Foley Artist

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Supervising Sound Editor Alexander Jenkins

Rerecording Mixer Alexander Jenkins

Oakland Location Sound Mixing Pablo Rivera

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Piney Grove Baptist Church
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Shaione Simmons
Shazanah Khan
Sheila Tagavilla
The Right to Read Project
Tolan Hill & Family
Toni Buttler & Family
Waterford School, Salt Lake City
Waterford Upstart

Filmed on Location in Oakland

Madison Park Academy
King's School Walk
Saint mary's College High School
Markham Elementary School
Lake Merritt

Filmed on Location in Virginia Beach

Virginia Beach GrowSmart
Williams Farm Recreation Center
Bow Creek Recreation Center
Norfolk State University
Bayside & Special Services Library

Filmed on Location in Memphis

Scenic Hills Elementary School
Memphis Botanical Gardens

Filmed on Location in Salt Lake City

Rowland Hall

Filmed in Washington, D.C.

The New America Foundation

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Family Video Footage and Photographs

The Weaver Family
The Adams Family
The Hunter Family

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