

### Introduction

On a beautiful late spring day in 1994, we rounded the corner of 113<sup>th</sup> Street and walked toward P.S. 76, the school building that housed the alternative public elementary school in Harlem we had started three years earlier. We were met by the sight of the principal of the school downstairs waving us down, and then saw three New York City television news vans parked in front. Our first thoughts were that someone had been killed, but then remembered with relief that the police had all our contact info and would have reached out sooner than the media could have.

The principal let us know that our small young school's first efforts at taking the annual reading test had resulted in the lowest reading scores in all of New York City, and the press wanted faces and comments to go along with the story. She suggested we go around the back entrance. We did all enter school through the back that day; escaping for just a moment longer the stark reality that we were radically failing our children.

We dodged the tv. coverage, but had to confront the reality of how we were failing. We gave ourselves a year to figure it out, improve our children's outcomes or hand over the reins to better equipped educators. The learning gathered in this book started on that sidewalk back in 1994.

"We" are David and Meredith Liben, two of the three teachers who opened the Family Academy in central Harlem in the fall of 1991. We had been successful middle and high school teachers in public and private schools, David for 15 years, Meredith for 9, before starting the Family Academy. The third founder, Christina Giammalva had come to us as a volunteer at the junior high we started in East Harlem and stayed there with us for 3 years, becoming a teacher in the process. None of us had ever taught below fourth grade. We knew nothing about beginning reading, and for much of the first three years of the school, buoyed by the holistic approach to reading instruction known then as the Whole Language movement, knew nothing about how ignorant we were

The Family Academy was a regular public school, authorized and run under the auspices of Community School District 3 that we got permission to open in the fall of 1991.

The school was designed to answer a very simple question: "If an urban school serving one hundred percent students from low income families had all the money it needed to educate its children as well as suburban children get educated, what should that school look like?" Our answer was a school that was open and running all day and during the summer, that provided on site supports and services for children and their parents, that had high quality extra-curricular offerings, and was 100% made up of students from families from the neighborhood. You can get a good sense of what we were striving for by reading the NY Times article footnoted below.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the article in the NY Times that gives a comprehensive look at the design and goals of the Family Academy: <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/26/us/school-public-school-harlem-that-takes-time-trouble-be-family.html>

None of those wraparound supports was provided by the NYCDOE, nor was the comprehensive library, school band, swimming lessons, sports and theater programs and other services we continued to build and improve. So money had to be raised from private sources, a task Christina gamely took on. At the time we started, there was little competition for educational philanthropy. There were no charter schools in New York, no Harlem Children’s Zone, and little competition for support from any other grass roots educational reform effort. National organizations such as Teach for America were just getting started, and it was the ‘90’s economic boom in New York City. We were able to raise all the money we needed to create the rich extracurricular programming and wraparound supports we had envisioned.

Parents were ecstatic to have their children in school all day in the same place where they could take classes, meet with a social worker, get help with job applications and take advantage of myriad other services. Because of the small size of the school (two classes per grade and growing just one grade bigger each year), everyone knew everyone. It was in so many respects an ideal environment. We could pay attention to the social and emotional needs, not only of students, but of their parents, and we were doing it in a close knit community under immediate local control. The Family Academy had everything many reformers have advocated for decades, ingredients we still believe in deeply.<sup>2</sup>

But we had the lowest reading scores in the city of New York the year our initial class of second graders<sup>3</sup> took the citywide reading test.

Why?

A good short answer would be, the three teachers who started the school knew nothing about beginning reading. This would be true. A closely related answer would be that even if everything else is done beautifully, if you don’t have the right curriculum you won’t have academic success. The Family Academy was a dramatic example of this. But it was not an isolated phenomenon. A recent report from the Brown Center on Education analyzing 2018 NAEP data show that the median (50<sup>th</sup> percentile) scores of children of color and children from low income families falls between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> percentile score for white and more affluent children.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, this has been true since a similar comparison was made back in 1996. The major reason for these discrepant results is the same reason we got the lowest reading scores in New York City back in 1994. The instructional approach we used to teach our children how to read, very similar to approaches in place in many schools today for foundational skills, wasn’t based on any scientific

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<sup>2</sup> See James Comer *School Power* 1995, in particular, for a summary of the work that influenced our thinking about creating a full service school for families.

<sup>3</sup> 1994 was the final year New York City tested 2<sup>nd</sup> graders in reading and math. That meant our first group of students were the only children in the school to take the test two years running, since the testing shifted to begin at 3<sup>rd</sup> grade the same year they became 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.

<sup>4</sup> This is the link to the Brown Center report of the 2018 NAEP results. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education-trends-in-naep-math-reading-and-civics-scores/>

evidence at all. That lack of result proves itself in our collective failure to teach too many children to read. This particularly impacts those children who need their learning accelerated by the schools they attend and the teachers who love and care for them.

Tipping our hand here – this whole book is about teaching children what they need to learn about reading on time so hardly anyone needs intervention. It's our goal that every child in every elementary school in America can read fluently by the end of second grade. That means things happen right for all children in all classrooms. They get to play with sounds and the sounds letters make in kindergarten. They get to decode – learn the magic patterns of the English language – in first grade, and come to recognize those magic patterns automatically and quickly. And then in second grade, they learn to read grade level text of all sorts fluently. They do all this while getting read to multiple times a day in school so they fully know the beauty and wonders that lie between the pages of a book. Then every child can unlock knowledge for herself all the rest of her life. That's what we're striving for.

So in this book we'll teach you what the research clearly points to. The good news is the research findings are consistent and clear. Yet much reading instruction is fuzzy and doesn't acknowledge those findings. Many educators are still recommending and following practices that match their training, without realizing these practices are problematic for vulnerable groups of children. And they persist in doing so even though many of their children aren't learning how to read. We'll explain what the right instructional approaches are, why they are much better for all children, and why it has been so hard for teachers and schools to embrace. We'll share some stories that we hope will bust myths about foundational skills mastery being dreary for young students and their teachers.

We'll look at each of the elements of a research based beginning reading (foundational skills) program. For each we will address what it is, how it should be taught and how it shouldn't. We'll reference the startlingly abundant research behind why each is essential and how best to teach it.

Along the way you'll see the changes we made at the Family Academy, how and why they worked so well, and how you can make the same changes in your school or community. We'll also share lessons learned and resources developed from the other work we've done around the U.S. In the last part of the book, contained in an appendix, we'll take a close look at some core ELA programs that get it right and how you can get more information for each.

Spoiler alert! The Family Academy test scores rose to be the highest of any non-gifted school in Harlem. Part of the story of how we did that runs through these chapters, and our work at the Family Academy forms the core of who we are as educators. David was the principal of the school for the first decade. Over the course of that same period, Meredith taught Kindergarten, then 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and 5<sup>th</sup> before becoming the director of the Family Academy middle school.

As a result of our dramatic turnaround in reading results, the school and our work came to the attention of the NYC Education Chancellor, who sent a young man doing *pro bono* consulting

work for the NYCDOE to study what we had done in developing our students to be such robust readers. That young man was David Coleman, one of the primary architects of the Common Core Standards. Since then, we've worked on and off with David. When he was chosen by the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to be one of the three writers of the ELA standards, he reached out to the two of us to support that work. David (Liben) synthesized the research behind the ELA standards that is captured in Appendix A<sup>5</sup>, and Meredith ran the two research projects that determined what text complexity meant, and what levels were valid for each grade band. That body of research has underpinned all the college and career readiness standards in place across the United States today.

Who is this book for? For anyone concerned about the poor reading results of America's children, but primarily for teachers: early career teachers, in pre-service, or teachers who are dissatisfied with how their students are reading. We wanted parents to be able to read this book and understand the ideas too, so they can be educated advocates for their children. Because we wanted the concepts and research we're discussing to be accessible, we did our best to keep educational jargon out, stories and clear prose in. We also made the book somewhat interactive by posing questions and ideas to reflect on a few times in each chapter. Your choice, of course, whether you do those or not, and if you prefer, you can interact directly with us via our website, Reading Done Right.

Why write this book now? Primarily because we can't stand that every child in this country doesn't learn to read in early elementary school. Children need to learn on time so they can reap all the benefits reading yields ever after. Nearly every child can learn to read. Too many don't. Non-readers and weak readers can't access the ideas, skills and knowledge they need to be college and career ready, to engage civilly, and to have the life options they deserve.

Educational outcomes for children who need schools the most don't have to stay low. If we follow the research into good literacy practices, and use instructional materials tightly aligned with those, they won't. Our hope for this book is very simple; more teachers and schools will start to use the right approaches for beginning reading. Children will benefit.

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<sup>5</sup> Common Core State Standards Appendix A [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)