SERP Stories-Season 2 Episode 2: Mississippi: The Next Mountain

- Dr. Catherine Snow : It has always struck me as just obstinate and misguided to think that if a 14-year-old can't read the history text, that what we should do is remediate by providing more phonological awareness training.

- Dr. Kala Jones : That's Dr. Catherine Snow, one of the researchers whose work on adolescent literacy shapes so much of what I do. And she's talking about a mistake this country makes constantly, treating a 14-year-old's reading struggle like it's the same problem a seven-year-old has. This episode, I want to show you what it looks like when an entire state focuses on early literacy, and I want to introduce you to members of the team that built it because they're about to tell me, in their own words, what they do differently and how they're doing it differently on their next venture in a different state. Kala: I'm Dr. Kala Jones, and this is "SERP Stories," where we follow the kids the system calls behind and asks a different question. Behind what? Behind whose timeline? Every episode this season, I go to a different state and follow decisions, spoken and unspoken, that shape how kids learn to read, all the way down to a kid in a classroom right now living with the consequences. And I introduce you to teachers and researchers who are proving that behind was never the whole story. On this episode, a state that moved a mountain and the next one is still learning how to move. Kala: If you spent any time in education policy over the last few years, you've heard this story. Mississippi, one of the poorest states in the country, a state that spent decades near the bottom of nearly every national reading ranking, turned itself around. In 2013, its fourth graders ranked 49th in the nation in reading. By 2024, they'd climbed to ninth. And for the first time in the test history, Mississippi fourth graders outscored the national average outright. People call it the Mississippi miracle, and it's real. This isn't a story where I'm here to tell you the gains are fake. They're not fake. In the share of kids scoring proficient or better, only one state in the entire country, Massachusetts, beat Mississippi's fourth graders in 2024. Kids who would've been essentially invisible in the data a decade ago are not reading on grade level. That matters, and it's worth celebrating, and it took an enormous amount of deliberate sustained work by real people to make happen. Kala: But here's the question almost nobody was asking a few years ago, and more and more researchers are asking now, "What happened to those same kids five years later?" That same climb, 49th to 9th, doesn't repeat itself in eighth grade. In 2013, Mississippi's eighth graders also ranked near the bottom, 50th in reading. By 2024, they moved up as well to 41st. That's real progress, but it pales in comparison to the fourth-grade gains. Dan McGrath, a retired federal official who spent decades overseeing this exact test, put it about as plainly as researchers ever do. Mississippi moved a mountain in fourth grade, but nobody is yet to find a way to move that same mountain in eighth. I want to be straight about one thing before I go further, because it's a genuine

unsettled argument, not a footnote. Part of Mississippi's fourth grade story is a law, the Literacy-Based Promotion Act passed in 2013, which requires third graders to pass a state reading test before advancing to fourth grade. Somewhere between eight and 10% of Mississippi's third graders get held back every year. Some researchers argue this mechanically inflates the fourth grade numbers because the lowest-scoring kids simply aren't in the room to take the test the following year. Mississippi's own researchers and the number of outside economists pushed back, pointing out that the gains started climbing years before the first retained cohort ever reached fourth grade, and the kids across the whole ability range improved, not just the ones near the retention line. I'm not even going to try and pretend to settle this argument in this episode, but what both sides do agree on is the only thing I actually need for this story. Whatever mix of better instruction and retention policy produced the fourth-grade miracle didn't survive the trip to middle school, and it's not even close. Kala: Somewhere in Mississippi right now, there's a 13-year-old who was a part of that miracle cohort who got the coaching, the phonics instruction, the early intervention, and who is reading below grade level in a system that doesn't have the same infrastructure built for them anymore. I asked Dr. Snow why the gap opens up in the first place.

- Catherine: That's a big question. My guess is that it's a make-or-break time because it's the first time that these liminal readers, the kids who can read the words fine, maybe read with just barely adequate fluency, that those kids are confronted with tasks that are well beyond their literacy capacities. So, they kind of slide under the radar. They're maybe not comprehending really deeply in third or fourth grade either, but they're doing okay and there's round-robin reading. They can get up and read two sentences and sound moderately competent, and they can participate in classroom discussion, and they can get B minuses on their short-answer papers.

- Kala: And then, middle school happens.

- Catherine: One of the biggest myths about adolescent readers is that they don't read well in adolescence because of the same reasons that first or second graders don't read well. Whereas, in fact, the challenges in adolescence are completely different for most readers.

- Kala: The miracle is real, so is the wall it runs into. For a long time, I assume the people who built the miracle just hadn't gotten to the wall yet, that it was next on the list. So, I decided it was best to ask some of the people who built the miracle directly. Dr. Carey Wright ran Mississippi's Department of Education through the years the miracle happened. She's the person most credited with building it. The standards, the coaching model, the statewide bet on the science of reading. She's not in Mississippi anymore. She's now Maryland State Superintendent of Schools, trying to build literacy reform again in a

different state with everything she learned the first time. I sat down with her and her Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Tenette Smith, who has her own front-row seat to this story. Before Maryland, Dr. Smith was Mississippi's State Literacy Director. She helped run the office that built the miracle from the inside, and now she's helping build whatever comes after it in a different state. I started by asking Dr. Wright what the hardest part was to align back in Mississippi.

– Dr. Carey Wright : I think the hardest part was, to me, I think convincing people that the science of reading was really the direction to head and not with balanced literacy. We had a lot of balanced literacy across the state, so I knew we were going to need to put in high-quality professional learning for teachers because we were hearing a lot of complaints that teachers weren't showing up ready to teach reading on day one, and Mississippi had been at the bottom for so long that the thing that we did was we picked the research-based strategy, and that was exactly why we picked science of reading. It was decades of research to support it. And I think that building the will was providing the support that teachers needed, so that they could see that we were supporting them in their work to build their capacity to be even better than they thought they could be. And so, we had a Teacher Advisory Committee, over 400 teachers, lots of feedback from teachers on what was working, what wasn't working, what did they continue to need. And I think once they saw that the agency and the department was really invested in them and their success, I think they became some of our biggest champions out in the field. And I think that once the score started really improving, even though it was incremental, I think that there had been such a culture of low expectations for so long that it really started to excite the state that these things were possible for our children as well.

– Kala: So, the biggest challenge was buy-in. And the fix? Support teachers and give them a real chance to be heard. Then, the results started speaking for themselves. Now, Mississippi were all in on kindergarten through third grade. So, I asked Dr. Smith: How does that early foundation have to evolve to carry kids into middle school?

– Dr. Tenette Smith (Chief Academic Officer for the Maryland State Department of Education): So, we think of a K–3 policy as establishing the floor for those cognitive and academic strategies, right? But once they enter middle school, you have to shift from, and I do hate this term, but shift from learning to read to reading to learn, right? But I think this means deliberately expanding the capacity of kiddos to be able to handle complex text that's discipline-specific, content-specific text, that's heavy with multi-syllabic words. You also see a shift in that abstract type of reasoning that starts to take place in grades four through eight. So, you can't just simply assume that a strong reader, early reader, will automatically translate into a strong adolescent reader. You have to include in those adolescent grades that systematic explicit teaching of multisyllabic words and

content-specific Tier 3 vocabulary. It's what makes or breaks a program, right? And instructionally, teachers in middle grades, they need support to be able to do this.

- Carey: And I think also with middle school, there's a lot of content-specific teaching, which is a little bit different than elementary school as generalists. And so I think you need to also work at getting your content people to realize that they need to be teachers of reading as well. Like, simply because you're a science teacher, you've still got kids that aren't reading your science materials. So, how are you going to spend time each week teaching those reading skills that they need in order to access the content?

- Tenette: Yeah.

- Carey: Yeah.

- Tenette: See, kiddos have to be given opportunities to wrestle with very complex texts, right, to build their stamina. And many times, as teachers, we're trying to get through the content, instead of looking at: How can I help this kid really internalize this information?

- Kala: So, I'm hearing two big challenges once kids hit middle school. One, the texts get more complex and more demanding. And two, middle and high school teachers aren't trained to teach reading. And I say this as someone who used to be one of them. So, I asked, "What does it take for a state to make sure that early momentum actually survives all the way to graduation?"

- Tenette: I think there are three key components to that. We shouldn't just get to fourth grade and experience this curriculum cliff, right? We shouldn't just get there and, "Oh, we're finished teaching all there is to teach around learning to read." So, we have to make sure that our standards, our assessment, and our curriculum are in alignment from kindergarten through grade 12. I think that we also have to make sure that we are supporting teachers in those grades as we move up. Grades four through eight, those teachers need just as much support, and possibly a little bit more, if they are content area teachers in helping a child who is still experiencing difficulties in learning to read, they need that support around disciplinary literacy. And then, I see people stop with the multi-tiered systems of support when kiddos enter fourth and fifth grade and into middle school. So, we need to ensure that we are continuously progress monitoring our students to ensure that they are acquiring and they know the material, and then providing them with timely interventions as we go along the way to ensure that they get to graduation, right?

- Carey: I do believe that coaching is a key lever in catapulting teachers' development even faster. You can imagine having a strong coach that knows everything about science of reading or everything

about mathematics, sitting in your room every day, non-evaluative, but providing feedback, modeling lessons, videotaping, and both of you watching your lesson together. And I think that that kind of job-embedded coaching on a daily basis is going to be a huge lever for us to catapult teachers to the next level of performance.

- Kala: Again, it keeps coming back to supporting teachers, especially through coaching, and to keeping interventions going into middle school for kids who are still struggling to read. Then, I asked, "How are they taking what they learned in Mississippi and putting it to work in Maryland?"

- Carey: I think that their similarities are strong in that we've made sure that our standards were up to date. We're revising our accountability system to make sure that it's strong. We've got a brand-new assessment that's coming on that's now aligned to our new standards. I think we put a strong literacy policy in place, a strong math policy in place. So, those are things that are very similar to what we did in Mississippi. And I think that that becomes the floor, if you will, that strong foundation that you need. I think one of the biggest differences that we see here is that a lot of districts have already hired coaches, and one of the things that we prided ourselves on in Mississippi and we have done here with our Student Statewide Coaching Model is that we hired the coaches. So, we went through the interview process to make sure that they knew everything that they needed to know about science of reading, what they needed to know about adult learning theory, so we could really build them up for success. And so, now, when you've got districts that have already hired coaches, what we are now doing is coming behind them and saying, "We're going to start offering a series of professional learning for the existing coaches." So, I kind of want to make sure that they've got all the same language, all the same skills, all the same background. And so we are now launching this whole professional learning for the existing coaches in order to provide them with the skills that they need to go back and really be doing in their schools what we know they should be doing.

- Kala: So, it's not enough just to have coaches. Those coaches have to be highly-trained and highly-effective. And that's the thing about policy. It looks clean on paper. Classrooms are not clean. So, I asked Dr. Smith and Dr. Wright what it looks like when policy runs into the mess of an actual classroom.

- Tenette: Policy always looks clean on paper, right? But when it comes time to come in, that's when it gets messy.

- Carey: Devil's in the details.

- Tenette: Yeah. The messy part is the human part.

- Carey: Yeah.

- Tenette: And so, we see overcorrection in places. For example, a state overemphasizes foundational skills, and now they're going to put all of their emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics, instead of looking at it holistically in providing those supports. You reduce the time that you spend on building knowledge, then you have the consequence of kiddos missing out on a very important part. We always looked at what we were doing in Mississippi as a multi-pronged approach of support. While we focused on the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, the policy, we understood that where the rubber meets the road, as Dr. Wright likes to say, is the actual implementation in the classroom, and you have to spend as much time on that coaching piece. You have to look at it very holistically and not overemphasize one part or the other.

- Carey: The other thing I'd add to that, and you got to monitor the daylights out of it.

- Tenette: Oh, yeah.

- Carey: I mean, if you're not out monitoring, you're not going to catch those unintended consequences. So, you've got these coaches that are spread out all over the state. We meet with them once a month, and that's a good way to get a feel for what is happening across the state. And one of the things that we did in Mississippi, we worked with the Regional Educational Lab Southeast, because as our scores started coming up, it was like an indication that things were happening in the classroom. But I went to the Director of Florida State, the reading center there, and I said, "I've got a gut feeling that this is working, but I'd love to know, Are we really seeing in the classroom what we want to see?" And she said, "Well, why don't you let my team come in, and we'll videotape hundreds of teachers across the state, we'll analyze all the video, and then we'll come back to you and let you know what we've seen?" And when she finished all the analysis, she said, "Not only are you seeing what you want to see in the classroom," she says, "But teachers are self-reporting that they now know more about reading than they ever knew before." And so, it was just a great way to, like, really ground it, but it was a great way to also ensure that we were doing what we needed to be doing, too.

- Tenette: Yeah, I think that another key piece is listening, and we do a lot of listening here in Maryland. So, you listen to, um, We have Teacher Advisory Committees, we have Parent Advisory Committees, Student Advisory Committees, but.

- Carey: Principal Advisory.

- Tenette: Principals, right. So, you have to listen to what the people who are actually implementing the policy, what they're saying,

so that as you need to make some course corrections, you're able to do it based on feedback.

– Kala: So, Dr. Wright didn't just go with her gut. She invited researchers into her schools to find out whether her policies were actually working. That's brave. And they didn't stop at what researchers said. They listened to parents, teachers, students, and principals, too. Then I asked what state leaders talked about with each other behind closed doors when the conversation turns to middle grade literacy.

– Tenette: How do you support a kiddo who is very far behind, an adolescent learner who is really struggling with foundational skills, right? How do you balance foundational skill remediation with rigorous on-grade-level instruction? How do you ensure that middle grade students are engaging in that challenging content, rather than the watered-down curriculum? We tend to over-scaffold in middle school. And how do you not over-scaffold for those middle grade learners? How do you keep them engaged, especially if they're struggling to learn to read? Where do we find those supports or those material that are on-grade level, engaging, but that I can scaffold enough, that they can understand the content involved within it?

– Carey: Yeah, the details also make a difference. Like, you'll hear a lot of administrators talking about: How do you build a master schedule that has interventions built in? It can't just be we can find this space at an elementary school having been an elementary principal. If you've got kids struggling in middle school and you've got kids struggling in high school, they need time for intervention. So, how do I, as an administrator, build a master schedule that allows time for that for any child that needs it?

– Kala: Dr. Smith mentioned a few other states she's watching closely for the same reason. Colorado testing new adolescent literacy interventions and North Carolina building high-quality instructional materials specifically for middle-grade literacy. States are finally starting to treat adolescent literacy as its own specialized discipline, not just an extension of K–3.

– Carey: Adolescent literacy came on a little later than K–3 literacy. I think that looking back on it, to be honest, even in Mississippi, we leaned in very heavily K–3. We expanded our Professional Learning 4 to 8, but I don't know that we developed an adolescent literacy policy like we have done here in Maryland.

– Kala: I want to sit with that for a second because I think it's the most generous thing anyone says in this whole episode. Dr. Wright didn't have to tell me that. Nobody made her. She built one of the most impressive literacy turnarounds in modern American education, and she volunteered on tape that she'd built the next chapter differently

if she had it to do over. That's not a confession. That's what it actually looks like when someone treats the job as a practice, instead of a trophy. And then, Dr. Smith, who ran the literacy office in Mississippi herself, told me something that made it land even closer to home.

– Tenette: When we were in Mississippi, SERP came to us around a strategic adolescent reading intervention, STARI, and sort of stuck our toe in it. So, I was interested in adolescent reading, like, years ago.

– Carey: Yeah.

– Tenette: But because we didn't have the funding...

– Carey: The funding.

– Tenette: Or the mechanism to really expand and roll this out, I think we missed an opportunity.

– Carey: I agree.

– Tenette: In Mississippi. But I am very excited that Maryland, we have an opportunity to address this right now in this time, in this space. And it's very, very exciting right now.

– Carey: Yeah.

– Kala: Okay, I'll say the obvious part. STARI is the intervention that I work on, the one I spend so much of my own work trying to get in front of more kids. And what I just heard is the person who ran Mississippi's own literacy office telling me the door was open years ago and the state just didn't have the budget or the machinery to walk through it yet. That's not a scandal, and I don't think it's a knock on anyone who was in that building at the time. Mississippi had just spent everything it had, political capital, coaching dollars, staff time, building the K–3 half of the system, and building it well. There wasn't a second pot of money just sitting around waiting to be spent on 13-year-olds. That's not a failure of imagination. It's a resourcing problem, and Dr. Wright and Dr. Smith are trying to solve it for real this time somewhere else. The miracle is real, so is the wall it runs into, and I don't think those two things cancel each other out. The first time, Dr. Wright and Dr. Smith figured out how to catch a seven-year-old. That took an enormous amount of institutional effort. 400 teachers giving feedback, coaches trained from scratch. Our research team sent out to independently verify that coaching was actually landing in the room. Mississippi, to its credit, actually did all of that. Now, they're trying to figure out in real time where the state can do the same work for a 13-year-old, not as an afterthought bolted onto a K–3 win, but as its own funded, staffed, monitored

system built the first time around, instead of the second. They already know most of what it takes. Dr. Smith laid it out herself, alignment all the way to 12th grade, disciplinary literacy support for content teachers, progress monitoring that doesn't stop at fifth grade, a master schedule that protects intervention time in middle school and high school. None of that is a mystery. It's a checklist. What was missing in Mississippi wasn't knowledge. It was a second round of the same political will and funding that built the first half. Kala: So, here's where that leaves the third team that I mentioned earlier, the one who got every early intervention Mississippi could build and is still, right now, reading below grade level with no coach assigned to her, no law protecting her spot in the schedule, no plan built around her the way one was built around her at seven. She's not a mystery, either. She's a checklist item that hasn't been funded yet in the state that wrote the checklist. Kala: Before we sign off, I always ask every guest this season one question, "Where did you grow up, and how do you think that place shaped your educational trajectory?" This episode, I got two answers, and they don't sound alike at all.

– Carey: I went through elementary school in... Well, actually through fifth grade, in New Mexico. And so, reading was a very central part of what I remember. We had required books and all that kind of thing, but I had a teacher that just really loved to spend time reading to us. So, even when I became a teacher, that was one thing that I spent a lot of time doing is reading to my children. And that was a special part of the day, coming in from recess, getting them settled down, and then picking up a good book and reading. And so, I do think that that sparked my interest. And then I had, when I moved to Maryland, I had a wonderful middle school teacher who took it to the next level in terms of literature. So, that's me. How about you?

– Tenette: Me, I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and growing up in Atlanta, you know, Atlanta has a strong history of strong historically Black colleges and universities, and it also had pockets of excellence, right? You had your civil rights movement, you know, grew in Atlanta. But there were also areas in Atlanta that had very high concentrations of poverty. And I actually grew up in one of those high concentrations of poverty areas. And so, it gave me a sense of urgency of always wanting to excel and move beyond the circumstances, beyond my ZIP code. It also instilled in me a desire to help others, right, to reach back and support.

– Kala: Two very different starting points, two people who ended up doing the same work, and now they're doing that same work in a totally different state years later. Next episode, I head to Florida, my home state, where the problem isn't too little pressure, it's too much, aimed at exactly the wrong target. Kala: Thanks for listening to this episode of "SERP Stories." If you want to learn more about STARI, visit serpinstitute.org/stari. And if you believe, like we do, that

middle school readers deserve better, share this episode, leave us a review, and follow along as we bring more research with purpose to the mic. I'm Dr. Kala Jones. See you next time. Kala: "SERP Stories" is produced by the SERP Institute, where educators, researchers, and designers come together to tackle school's most pressing challenges. Explore our work at serpinstitute.org.