

## Episode 56: Angela Uherbelau

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** Hello everyone. This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thanks for listening. You can catch us on 99.1 FM every Sunday in the Portland Metro at 4:30 PM, or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts. That includes Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, and Amazon Music and others. And as always, you can find segments on our website at [childinst.org](http://childinst.org).

My guest today is Angela Uherbelau. She is the founder of Oregon Kids Read, a grassroots literacy and equity group dedicated to ending our state's literacy crisis where more than 50% of third graders aren't reading at grade level. She's also a freelance and opinion writer whose work has appeared in many regional and national publications.

Angela, welcome to the podcast.

[00:00:47] **Angela Uherbelau:** Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

[00:00:49] **Rafael Otto:** So good to have you here today. I wanted to start with talking about the literacy crisis and what that means. I know, you know, I mentioned that in your bio and intro more than 50% of third graders aren't reading at grade level. That data is, I think based on 2019 data, I know there's some impacts of the pandemic and those kinds of things, but give us an overview of where we're at with literacy in Oregon right now.

[00:01:16] **Angela Uherbelau:** Sure, yeah. So we are in the midst of what I would say was a literacy crisis, and since the pandemic has become a literacy emergency. So as you mentioned in 2019, which is the latest data that we have in Oregon, over 50% of our third graders were not reading at grade level.

First of all, that is a pretty shocking statistic when you think most families, we drop off our babies in kindergarten, and we just expect that we're handing them over to an educational system that will provide them at the very least with the building blocks of learning, the foundations of learning. And of course reading is the primary building block of learning.

So the fact that we have so many of our kids who are struggling with that foundational skill is really quite alarming. It's also important for us to break down that number and look at specific groups of kids who have historically really been underserved and continue to be underserved in the state.

So when we're talking about literacy, we're talking about 70 plus percent of our Black, Indigenous, and other third graders of color, not reading at benchmark before the pandemic. We're talking about with our students who have living... they're living with disabilities, over 78% of them not reading at grade level.

Because there was a pause in statewide testing during COVID, we're still waiting to find out exactly where our students are currently. But we know that even before, they were not being served in the way that they need to and deserved to in terms of literacy.

And I do wanna point out too that Oregon is not an outlier in this. This is a national problem, an national literacy crisis. But the good news is, there are solutions to it. There are things that we can do to improve, starting with just the basic understanding that research shows that almost any child can learn to read given the right instruction.

So I want to raise awareness about the crisis, the emergency around literacy. And we also wanna leave people with a sense of hope that this is not something that cannot be solved. We can solve this problem and give our kids the tools they need to become readers.

[00:03:35] **Rafael Otto:** I'd like to talk about some of those solutions. But before we do, what do you think is behind the crisis? And I know you described it as an emergency now. And I think we are hearing some things at least anecdotally about how difficult it was for young children to continue learning and continue to learn to read through the pandemic. And I know we'll have more data about that, hopefully soon.

But even leading up to that, the numbers around third grade literacy and reading weren't great. What do you think is behind that crisis and behind the situation that we're in today?

[00:04:09] **Angela Uherbelau:** It's a great question. I think that what is behind the literacy crisis is systemic failure. So this idea that reading is natural and it comes naturally is actually a myth. Language comes to us naturally. We're wired for language, for oral language, but we are not wired to read. And so the vast majority of us require really systematic, and what we say is explicit, so very very clear instruction in learning how to build the building blocks of reading.

Unfortunately, it's the current state of teacher prep programs nationally, and also here in Oregon, where our teachers are not trained in what is known as the science of reading.

The majority of teachers don't get that training in their teacher prep programs. And so they come into the classroom full of enthusiasm, but they haven't been given the tools, the really concrete tools they need, to help potential readers become readers. So I think that that is really at the heart of why we have such a crisis, in this country and in this state, is that the kids, the majority of kids who enter the classroom and need a specific kind of explicit instruction are not getting it. And they didn't get it before COVID and many of them... too many of them are not getting it currently.

[00:05:33] **Rafael Otto:** That makes perfect sense. Obviously teacher's ability to teach kids how to read is crucial. Talk about the science of reading and what that means. Explain that a little bit for our listeners.

[00:05:46] **Angela Uherbelau:** Sure. So the science of reading, the term actually refers to over 40 years of research in what happens as potential readers become readers. And in 1997, Congress established this panel, a national panel on reading. And they came out in 1997 with what are known as the five pillars of early literacy. So the five components that make up an effective reading program in order for all children to be able to access reading. And the first one of those pillars has a big name. It's called phonemic awareness, but it really means the awareness of sound.

[00:06:27] **Rafael Otto:** Sounds a little overwhelming, actually.

[00:06:29] **Angela Uherbelau:** It does, doesn't it. Right? Phonemic awareness. What is that?

But again, it... I'll just be fully transparent too, as a parent... So I'm a parent, a mother of two children. One's a rising sixth grader going into middle school and one's a rising fifth grader. And, as a parent starting elementary school with them, I knew almost nothing about this. I thought, again, that reading... I think I had my own biases around I myself was a person, a child, that accessed reading somewhat easily. And so I thought, "Oh, my experience must be everybody's experience," which it's not. So I had no idea that the beginnings of reading actually don't have anything to do with print. They have to do with the ability to hear and segment sounds.

So phonemic awareness... I'll give you an example. What does that mean when we're talking about being able to hear and segment sounds? So, with the word cup, for example, we need for kids to be able to understand the

sounds in the word before they even attach that to print. So to know that it's made up of three sounds "k" "ə" "p" and to be able to hear those sounds. And then once you can hear those sounds and identify those sounds, then you have the ability to manipulate sounds.

So, for example, if I'm working with a, um, I am not a tutor, but if I'm working with my own kids, for example, to say, okay, what happens if we have cup, "k" "ə" "p," and we take away the "p" and we replace it with a "t"... with a "t," then what happens to the sounds as they're combined to make a new word? What's that new word? "k" "ə" "t" - cut!

So I think for many of us, we just didn't know or don't know the importance of kids being able to identify the sounds. And to sort of start to identify what happens in their mouths, in our throats when we make those sounds before we ever move on to the next pillar of early literacy, which is phonics. And that's about the graphing, so the print that's connected to sounds. So this process of you can hear the sounds, you can segment the sounds and then you start to connect those sounds with letters, and then those letters with words. And a third pillar of early literacy is fluency. So it's basically the speed and ease at which we start to be able to learn to read.

The fourth pillar is around vocabulary. So as we start to build an understanding of sounds and then words, what do those words mean? And then the final pillar is around comprehension. So we start to bring in all of those different things into our ability to read. And so we can read a passage, not only identify the words in the passage, but what they mean and then how they build on ideas.

So a lot goes into learning how to read. And I think that, again, for many of us that may have accessed reading a bit easier... to be able to understand, oh, it is a complex process. But it's one that can be broken down and one that can

be taught. That's sort of the science of reading. It's not a single curriculum. It's not a single worksheet. It's actually the body of science that goes into informing how explicit structured instruction can help turn potential readers into readers.

[00:09:55] **Rafael Otto:** I appreciate the breakdown. When you're talking about early literacy, you're talking really about preschool. Before kids enter kindergarten. So there's this relationship. I think, you know, I can envision applying the science of reading to preschool environments, where kids are interacting with teachers and preparing to go into elementary school.

But some of the things you're talking about, the phonemic awareness, that's beginning when kids are very, very young. And so it strikes me that the role of parents is also important. You know, parents, as educators. Parents having some understanding of what literacy means when they're reading to their kids, or in whatever way that they're interacting with their children, is also a key factor.

[00:10:43] **Angela Uherbelau:** Yes, absolutely. And things that might seem fun and silly, like nursery rhymes or even singing, you know, where I think all of those things build on a child's ability to hear sound and make sense of sound. So, as parents, as we connect sound to meaning, just even hearing our own conversations, our children, hearing our conversations and the use of a range of words and as also taking the time to explain what a word means or how to use it in a sentence, but all orally, I think is important as well.

I also think both of my girls went to an incredible preschool in Portland and I was really grateful for the ages and stages, you know, how a lot of Preschool now offer this kind of, pre-screening where we take note of milestones around growth and fine motor skills so that we can see, you know, how are our children? Track our children's development in order to be able to see, oh, wait,

there's a milestone that's being missed and how can we help support that child in the preschool or at home, or with the pediatrician around those milestones. And I'm hopeful that in Oregon we will develop something similar around pre-literacy so that if we know the importance of sound to reading, if we can develop some tools to help providers and families be able to know where maybe kids are doing well or where they might be missing, and how we can supplement and support as they start their journey heading into kindergarten.

I think that that could be a really helpful tool just because I know the other tools have been really transformative for families that are... I mean, many of us aren't... none of us are born experts and I know as a parent, sometimes you think this amazing being that has now entered my life, there's no instructions, manual, where do I begin? So, I think that that could be something really helpful for us to develop in Oregon.

[00:12:41] **Rafael Otto**: Yeah, it can be a lot for new parents. Tell me about Oregon Kids Read. You described... it's a grassroots organization. Why did you found it? What was behind that?

[00:12:53] **Angela Uherbelau**: So Oregon Kids Read. I have to tell you, I think that, as I said, entering elementary school with my girls, I'm so grateful to our public K-5. Because I feel as though I have had my own extraordinary learning journey alongside my girls, as they have gone through school. And part of it was, I became really involved with the PTA and just getting to know the extraordinary teachers at our school.

And I remember when the state test scores came out and we got to see what our test scores were at our particular school. And sitting with teachers who really were going through what I have to describe as some deep sadness and grief. Because you know, some of them are very long time teachers and they

said, "I'm doing my best in the classroom, but I'm still not reaching a lot of our kids."

And our teachers want to reach every child. So there was this real sadness when we saw the breakdown of our, of how many of our kids were not reading at grade level and teachers feeling as though, "I don't know what to do, and I need more resources and I need more professional development, but I don't know where to start."

And around the same time I was in my car listening to the radio, and I heard a reporter named Emily Hanford, who was reporting for American Public Media. And Emily Hanford has done some extraordinary investigative reporting into literacy in the United States and why there's this huge gap between children's potential. Which we know is there to be able to read and the outcomes that we're seeing. And I learned from her podcast and also some of her articles about how we have this body of the science of reading. So we know how kids can learn how to read and yet the instruction that they're getting does not line up. So where's the gap and why aren't we filling it?

And so that's where Oregon Kids Read was born. As a parent, I thought, I didn't know anything about this and it just happens, it turns out that my girls are part of the minority where they access reading easily as well. But then I saw what reading does for them, which it's also done for me. It just opens the entire world to them. And some of their classmates were struggling needlessly and our teachers were struggling needlessly too.

So Oregon Kids Read is about offering teachers the tools they need and deserve to be able to teach reading. And also to offer our kids the immediate instruction they need. Whether it's in the general education classroom or through intensive tutoring, and that's how Oregon Kids Read was born.

[00:15:33] **Rafael Otto:** What are some of the other solutions that you were alluding to earlier? What can we be doing as a state, as parents, as advocates to see some real shift in what's happening in our classrooms around literacy?

[00:15:47] **Angela Uherbelau:** That is a great question. I think that, in the beginning, as I mentioned before, it is a pipeline issue. So we really need Oregon colleges and universities that are training our teachers to center the science of reading. To use the body of research, to be able to prepare their teachers. And unfortunately, here in Oregon, the vast majority of our teacher prep programs are not doing that.

There is an incredible bright light in the state right now, which is Eastern Oregon University. So they have been and are completely revamping their teacher prep program to center the science of reading, so that any educator that comes out of their programs will be as well equipped as they can be to teach reading, which is very exciting.

So we need to see that kind of commitment and dedication in every Oregon teacher prep program across the state. Because teachers that are taking out loans or paying for tuition and spending all of these hours, they deserve to be the best teachers they can be. That's why they enter the profession. So they deserve those tools from that outset.

And then moving from the university system to the teachers that we currently have, those teachers in the classroom deserve access to professional development and the science of reading teacher training as soon as possible. And again, there are some bright lights around the state with districts that have started offering their teachers this training. Portland Public Schools is one of them, Beaverton and Lake Oswego. But really any teacher in every district deserves access to that.

And then moving to the individual student, we can't wait for, and we won't wait for teacher prep programs to revamp their programs or for teachers in the classroom, because it does take a while to be trained. We need to start offering intensive tutoring to our potential readers, our struggling readers as soon as possible. Because, if you're a family whose child struggles to read and you have financial resources, then you hire a tutor to help them achieve their potential. Well, we don't want reading to be a luxury in this state that's only available to families with means. Every child deserves access to that.

So those are the three things that we are really pushing for, as well as curriculum that aligns with the science of reading. So there's a lot of different components that go into creating and supporting readers. And we're trying to continue to push on all fronts and not wait. Because as any family with young children knows or preschool providers that work with young children, is that, the days are long, but the years are short. So I think, if we keep saying, "Oh, well, let's wait. You know, our kids can wait another year or three years for us to figure this out." Well, especially when it comes to literacy, they can't wait because if they are behind, they just fall further behind if we don't intervene and help them get the tools they need right away.

[00:18:55] **Rafael Otto:** There's a phrase that I haven't heard all that recently. But it's the idea that you learn to read so you can read to learn. And I think it's still a powerful concept. And I think it ties into what you were saying earlier. Something that you noticed with your kids, where you could see that once they learned to read and they got maybe not a mastery, but they had a comfort with literacy and they were working on comprehension that it really opened up doors for them.

It opened up new worlds for them and that's a powerful place to be as a young learner.

[00:19:30] **Angela Uherbelau:** Yes, absolutely and I think it's a powerful place to be intellectually or academically. But I also want to stress how important reading can be for social, emotional well-being of our kids. I'll give you an example that one day I came home, my eldest daughter at that point was in third grade and I came home and she was sitting on the couch with a book and she said, "Mommy, I had a terrible day, but now I'm reading and I'm calming myself down." And I thought, "Yes, we read for pleasure. We read for learning and sometimes we read for comfort." It is a way to maybe give ourselves a moment to delve into some other world that feels really good to us to take time out.

And then the flip side is, of that is that so many of our kids are sitting in classrooms where they can't do what their classmates, their colleagues are doing, even though they're capable of it. They're not able to do it in the moment and how hard that is for our kids. That we're asking them to sit in classrooms hour after hour, day after day, where they are not being able to fully participate in the life of the classroom, the life on the playground. If people are talking about books, how do you enter into that conversation if you're having trouble reading?

And I think that we really start to segregate our children very early on by either the ability to read or the inability to read. And I think that we need to just really keep that in the forefront of the mind. That reading isn't just about eventually getting a good job. Reading is about being able to fully engage in the world around you and also with others, with friends, people that you encounter, and building relationships. So it's something that is essential for all of us and we all deserve access to it.

[00:21:33] **Rafael Otto:** Are you seeing any impacts of the digital world that our kids are exposed to? I think when we talk about reading or at least for me,

most of the time I think about books. The old fashioned paper books, you know, and I still love to read those. But we also do so much reading online and on our computers, at least I do. I'm reading news sites and articles all the time. And then there's social media and those kinds of things and our kids are exposed to that more than I ever was when I was growing up and increasingly so. And I'm just wondering if you're seeing some kind of impact on literacy, because of technology one way or another. I don't really know what that looks like right now but I'm curious what you're observing.

[00:22:22] **Angela Uherbelau:** Yeah, I think that is a great question. I think that so much of technology is still print, as you said, there are new sites, there are books online, ways for us to engage with print in that way. And of course, so much of technology is visual. And I suppose my wondering and somewhat of a concern is that if we don't give kids the tools to be able to choose, if we don't give them the gift of literacy, so that when they go to the internet, they can choose how they're going to engage. But if literacy has been really actively withheld from you and then you get online and you have difficulty reading, it's not going to be fun to spend the next 10 minutes trying to wade through a news article or wade through, you know, even a short book. Then it makes sense that you'll wanna turn to something visual because it's just a lot easier and more enjoyable if you can access it.

So I think at the end of the day, it's about giving our kids choices. Not everyone has to love reading and be a voracious reader. But everyone has, I believe, the right to be able to do that if they choose. So, if you're curious about something, there's definitely things where you can take that curiosity to a video and learn in that way. And that can be a very powerful thing, but also if you wanna take your curiosity to print and you're not able to access the print.

I think that we are really making it difficult for our kids to reach their full potential, whatever that may be, whatever their passions are, if they don't have the ability to read. And I think it certainly goes beyond that when we're

talking about how do we engage as a society. Politically, for example, if you want to learn about a candidate, if you want to be able to read the voter's pamphlet, those are some very basic parts of civic life that everybody should be able to have access to.

And so that's the aspiration.

[00:24:30] **Rafael Otto:** And just the skill of being able to digest information, multiple points of view, dig in to see whether something is factually correct or not... those kinds of things. That type of critical thinking and analysis is connected to literacy and in my mind, it is and it becomes more than just learning how to read things.

It gets at what you're talking about in the five pillars with the science of reading. It's around comprehension and analysis and critical thinking. And all of those things are connected and they begin really early, really young.

[00:25:06] **Angela Uherbelau:** Yes, absolutely. I think fundamentally, when we're talking about literacy, ultimately we're talking about power, and we're talking about agency and who has power and who has agency, who has the ability to make choices in life. And I think that literacy, if you can read, and you can, as you said, start to be able to discern what you're reading, compare things that you're reading, have this ability to question, have the ability to basically fully engage. Then that's power that no one can take from you. Or even reading fiction, being able to enter these worlds and these other ways of being, or nonfiction entering the world of ideas...

I think certainly in our society being literate is very, very powerful. Which means the flip side is being illiterate is a very vulnerable place to be. It's so hard to access so many of the things in life without being able to read. And it's also about, if you cannot read, really having to lean on others to interpret for

you, that's a very vulnerable place and we need to be able to empower our children from the beginning. All the way up through, you know, the end of life to give them as much power as they can to make the choices freely in their lives that they want to and need to.

[00:26:33] **Rafael Otto:** If you are a parent or a guardian or a family member, and you are concerned about your children or what's happening in the school system or their preschool classroom, what can you do? What are some resources that are out there?

[00:26:48] **Angela Uherbelau:** That's a great question. Well, I think I'll start on that individual level. So if you are a parent or family member, guardian, a preschool provider, a teacher, one thing that I'd recommend is there's a website called heggerty.org. So it's h-e-g-g-e-r-t-y.org. And they have free resources for pre-K through first grade. Free online resources that you can use with your student or your child just to check in about where your child is at, and not something that you can do from home. And moving then from sort of the personal into more of an advocacy role, I'd say, especially heading into kindergarten, first grade, second grade, it's giving yourself complete permission to ask questions.

So of teachers, of the principal, of your particular school district, are they using the science of reading in the classroom? Are they offering teacher training to the teachers in your building or the teachers in your district?

And on the Oregon Kids Read website, we do have a list of individual K-5 elementary schools across the state that have been historically underserved and neglected by the state. And we are pushing the state to pay for teacher training and intensive tutoring for students in those schools. So I'd encourage you to also take a look at those schools and to not be alarmed or put off.

Because my elementary school is one of those where my girls go and it's an incredible community.

So it's not to use it as a way to be worried about your school. It's more just to be able to inform yourself of how you can be an advocate for your child and other children at those schools.

[00:28:41] **Rafael Otto**: Wonderful, wonderful.

Well, Angela, thank you so much. It's been great talking with you and great to have you on the podcast today.

[00:28:48] **Angela Uherbelau**: Thank you so much for having me. I've really enjoyed this conversation and I'm grateful for it.