

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #310

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

If we can just change hearts and minds and help educate the masses, then I think we can really be on a path to ensuring that every child has the right to learn to read

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Jessica Reid Sliwerski, co-founder and CEO of Ignite Reading. Jessica, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Thank you so much, Annalies. I am really excited to be here.

Annalies Corbin:

Well, I'm excited to have you. And we're gonna be talking about one of my favorite things, which is littles getting ready for school, reading, doing all of the amazing things that that world has to offer to them. But let's set some context for our listeners as we get started.

Ignite Reading is a company on a mission to ensure every child can read by the end of first grade. Through high-dosage, one-on-one virtual tutoring delivered by a virtual network of highly trained tutors, Ignite Reading partners with school districts across the country to close the early literacy gap before it becomes a life sentence.

And I really love that phrase, because everybody who's been in education for very long understands that if we do not set kids up early, we set them up for a really tough journey. So, thank you for that, Jessica.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Thank you. Thank you for this opportunity to talk about this work.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And I wanna talk about the heart and soul of your work, the fact that that first grade promise, as a very bold and research-backed North Star, basically says that 85% of first graders should be reading on grade level, and that waiting until third grade to intervene is waiting way too long.

So, talk to us a little bit about the research and about the why. But more importantly, share with us just a little bit as we get started about why are you, Jessica, so passionate about this? Why did you decide, "This is the thing I wanna be doing," and start this whole company?

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

I am a lifelong educator. I started my career in the classroom over 20 years ago as a fifth grade teacher in the Bronx, and I didn't know how to teach my kids to read. I was not trained as part of my teacher preparation program. I entered the classroom, very quickly saw many of my students were not reading on grade level, and I didn't know how to help them.

And I went my entire first two years of teaching wanting, craving being able to help make them better, stronger readers, and asking for help from anyone and everyone who would listen, and not getting that support and not actually being trained in the way that the brain learns to read. So, I lost two years. My kids lost two years.

Fast forward, and I then went to work at a school in Harlem where I was a first grade teacher and just happened to be trained in an evidence-based curriculum and began teaching my kids to read. Very quickly saw that, yes, it's a science, and I don't believe it's a rocket science, because if I could be trained in my third year of teaching to implement a curriculum with fidelity, and if my kids, my littles, could learn to read on time, then I think many schools could be doing this. And to call it a rocket science makes it inaccessible when actually it's table stakes for everything else we're doing in education and everything else that a classroom teacher needs to be able to do.

So, I was ignited very early in my teaching career, and when you've taught a child to read, let alone a whole classroom of kids to read, it's something that is so deeply

emotionally gratifying. It's the serotonin overflow, and I was just like, "I want more of this." You know, they come to you and they don't even know the alphabet, all of your kids, and then to leave your room at the end of the year and be able to fluently read paragraphs of text, it's literally life-changing and incredible, and you watch the kids ignite.

So, I set this intention of wanting to help as many kids as possible learn how to read, and yet I had no idea how I was going to do that. I just knew that that was my calling. And over the course of the next two decades, I continued to say yes to different opportunities in education that ultimately enabled me to turn that intentionality into passion and purpose, and a company that I now lead that is teaching tens of thousands of children to read each school year.

So, it's been an incredible journey, and I am more convinced than ever that first grade is the most important moment in a child's journey of learning to read. And we have this rhetoric of "read by grade three," but that's too late. It's a lagging indicator when we're looking at state testing data and seeing so many third graders who are not proficient readers. We've missed the crucial window.

So, we have the second year of a longitudinal study with Johns Hopkins University that was recently published, and they were studying our program at scale two school years in a row, looking at first graders across 13 school districts. And not only did they find that for the second year in a row, we dramatically increased the number of kids who were below benchmark at the beginning of our intervention to then moving to on benchmark. We had on average 6% on benchmark at the beginning. By the end of the intervention, that had changed to 48%, which is an 8x increase. You don't see that kind of growth in early literacy, particularly when you consider that the kids that we were working with are the most vulnerable, most at risk, lots of kids with IEPs, lots of multilingual learners.

And across all demographics of students participating in this study, kids gained an additional five months of learning with no equity gaps. So, we have these tropes in education around why kids don't learn to read, and I'm sure you've seen this as well, in time where we blame kids or we blame their families. And what this study actually shows, because of the amount of growth we were able to achieve, because of the fact that there were no equity gaps, that this is not an issue that is because of the kids.

Annalies Corbin:

It's rarely an issue because of the kids. Take your pick on what the topic is. Let's just put that out there. So, thank you for that.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

How are we doing everything in our power to give children access to a just-in-time intervention so that we ensure they learn to read on time? And what we also found was that for the kids who made it to benchmark in first grade, in year one of the intervention, 85% of those kids were still on benchmark at the end of second grade without further tutoring intervention.

So, when you think about the amount of money we hemorrhage downstream when kids don't learn to read on time, trying to intervene our way out of a problem, and oftentimes still not being able to close the gaps, here is a very proactive way to invest in ensuring that the most fundamental part of being in education, being in school happens, that you learn to read, and you learn to read on time.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. I love that. And also, the other thing that I really love about this is... and I appreciate the fact that there is a benchmark out there that says we want all kids to read by the third grade. Fabulous. We need those bars, but that's a pretty low bar, and to your point, we're really missing a lot. We can do much, much better than that.

So, I'll start by, the states that have mandated to say we have to have this third-grade guarantee, great. I'm glad we're guaranteeing a thing, right? To your point, let's do more with that. And I think that the most important thing about that is that if we wait, if we wait for third grade, and then we get there, and then we find out that a huge percentage of our kids aren't even gonna make that, not only are we setting them up for a really tough journey moving through the rest of their K-12 and post-secondary and life experience, but more importantly, we've really taken two or three amazing years of reading and learning away from kids. If I can read on grade level as a first grader, then second and third grade are gonna be amazing for me, and so on.

So, I think that that's a really interesting piece of this conversation. And I've heard many times, unfortunately, in my career, the idea that kids are somehow disposable. And to your point, that it's the family's issue, it's an environmental issue. There's always a lot of excuses. And yet, we know, you are living proof of that, right? That there are so many educators out there that do not believe that. And yet, the system that they're working in is working against them.

So, first and foremost, I appreciate the fact that there's a lot of research behind it. You've got the efficacy around what's happening. It's proving successful. Your little buddy that's with you agrees with us.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Preach, Annalies.

Annalies Corbin:

So, that's wonderful. But I'm really curious, at the end of the day though, to your point, individual teachers can be passionate, want to really do this work, believe so desperately in their kids and the opportunity that their kids have. Yet, oftentimes, those educators find themselves functioning inside of a system that does not have the same set of priorities. They may have the mandates, but they don't seem to have the wherewithal. There's a lot of things stacked against educators that make it really, really difficult for us to do the right things and to serve kids.

So, the other piece of your work that I think is really, really interesting is the recognition that to really get there, especially when students show up to first grade behind, they don't even have some of the basic skills they should have had by the time they get to first grade in many cases, that it can be a really, really big systems lift just to bridge that gap. Most districts don't have the wherewithal to deal with that level of intervention all on their own.

Like the one-on-one, the process that you use with Ignite Reading, that's not gonna happen by itself in a traditional setting. Correct? I mean, sort of set that context piece for our listeners because I think a lot of the people that are listening, they're like, "Oh, yes, Jessica, I feel you. I've lived this. I understand exactly what you're talking about." And yet, you've been able to build a mechanism that allows Ignite Reading to partner with districts. Again, there are fee for services, but this is no different than buying curriculum, buying textbooks, buying activities. This is the reality of the business of school.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

The first thing I will say is just like I was on my soapbox around we blame the kids and the problem is not the kids, we also blame the teachers, and that's not fair either 'cause as a lifelong educator, as somebody who also was a teacher, I know that the teachers in classrooms are teaching their hearts out and doing everything they can to help their kids. Nobody goes into teaching unless they love kids.

Annalies Corbin:

100%. You have to love learning, right? Yeah. Otherwise, it's a thankless job in many ways. It's exhausting. Yeah.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

So, this is a system issue. And a lot of it comes down to folks not truly understanding

more of the nuances around science of reading and, and how kids learn to read. So, what you see happening right now is a lot of policy and a lot of system decisions around adopt high-quality instructional materials, train teachers in science of reading, give them evidence-based curricula, use screeners, and screen all of your kids at the start of the school year, especially in grades K through 2.

All of that is necessary, all of that is important, but it is not sufficient because the other nuance that we are not talking about is, first of all, that kids are supposed to be reading fluently by the end of first grade. So, people think there's more time than there actually is. There's not. By the end of first grade. And that, at least, 60% of kids, and it can be more depending upon who the kids are in the school system or the school building, they need more than just that single lesson that a teacher is teaching each day, even if she is following her scope and sequence with perfect fidelity. So, how do we then expect teachers to do more? We're like, "Oh, well, group them. Use your data, group them, run small groups." And that is really hard to do.

Annalies Corbin:

It is incredibly difficult to do, 100%.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Show me a classroom teacher who has run enough small groups every single day, and that can precisely differentiate the instruction within those small groups, has the materials, is trained on the materials, has the ability to constantly collect data and regroup the kids. That is really hard.

And by the way, this is just one of probably half a dozen subjects an elementary teacher is expected to teach. So, we are putting a lot on our teachers and not honoring that if we are going to ensure all kids learn to read, you have to be providing kids with the level of dosage and precision that is necessary. And based on who each individual child is as a learner, based on the gaps they're starting the school year with, they're going to need different things. They will need different amounts of instruction, and one classroom teacher can't do that.

So, in building and designing Ignite Reading, it was from a place of passion because I am unapologetically obsessed with teaching kids to read. And my belief that every single child deserves the right to learn to read on time, and that learning to read is as fundamental as the air that we breathe, that nourishes our body. And it was also born from a place of deep empathy and lived experience for all the stakeholders who are trying so hard to solve this problem, whether those are parents, whether those are teachers, school leaders, district leaders, because I've warned so many.

So, what we're doing with Ignite Reading is we are essentially augmenting the power of a single teacher. So, I'm a first grade teacher. I have 25 kids in my classroom. 16 of them are below benchmark And it's time for small group instruction or it's our MTSS block, and the kids who need Ignite Reading because they're still working on basic alphabet knowledge, or I'm over here teaching all about vowel teams, and the rest of the group is not yet even to the point where they can automatically segment and blend CVC words.

So, they will meet with their Ignite tutor daily, one-on-one, 15 minutes. They grab their device, put on their headphones, click a button, and boom, it's a real human on the other side of the screen, just like you and I are real humans talking to each other. And that human is highly trained. They've had almost a hundred hours of science of reading, learning to teach the curriculum, practicum experience. They are highly accountable. We have weekly performance management and ongoing professional learning for them, and everything is data-driven because we are doing baseline diagnostics to understand precise gaps. And then, as we're teaching, there's daily formative assessment, routinized progress monitoring.

So, I can trust now that my 16 kids who need more targeted support because they're below benchmark are going to get that, and it's a 15-minute portion of what's typically at least a 30-minute block in my schedule.

Annalies Corbin:

Right. And you have the confidence that there's that fidelity while those 16 kids are doing that, that they desperately need, I can focus on these other children who need something else.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

That is exactly right. And those other children who need something else, their needs never get met.

Annalies Corbin:

Right. Right.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

'Cause we look at them, and we're like, "They're fine." You know what? They're not fine. They deserve to have differentiated instruction as well. They deserve to be working on advanced fluency and comprehension and pushed within their zones of proximal development.

So, here is a model where every child wins. The teacher wins, too. With this model, the kids' needs are met, and now I'm freed up to focus on other kids as well, and everyone's data is improving.

Annalies Corbin:

I love the thinking behind the work, right? And the partnership with the classroom teacher is a big piece of the direct success of this working, right? So, I'm really curious then as just imagining our listeners thinking, "Oh my goodness, this would just make my life so much easier as an early elementary..." And you know, it's interesting to me to hear you talk about your experience because I grew up in a family of teachers. My mom was a K3 teacher, some of her teaching career in the two-room schoolhouse in a very rural school district in Wyoming, right? And you know, I vividly remember, and even to this day, she talks about having to deal with thinking about all of those different kids that needed those different pieces and parts and learning and teaching together. And so, I appreciate the partnership that you've crafted as part of this with that individual classroom teacher in that moment.

But as I think about teachers who are listening to this conversation, one of the pieces that's really curious to me is how as a trained teacher, we have the tools necessary typically to be able to do this. But to your point, too many kids, not enough time, so many different variables that are happening.

And yet the other thing that I hear from educators is even if all the time was there, I often don't know, truly with fidelity, when I step back and actually admit it to myself in the mirror, I don't know what to do with that data. So, I wanna talk just for a minute about how you ensure that the educators that you're working with are ready and equipped. So, I assume that there's some training or professional development, and that's one of those core questions that my listeners, they always wanna know. How can I hit the ground running with this and know that I don't have to wait till the end of the year? Yes, there's research, but how do I know it's gonna work for my kids and my community and my classroom? And what does that support structure for me look like as part of this work?

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

So, this is one of my favorite things about designing and building, is that I am constantly going back to what my experience was, which sadly, it was forever ago, and yet so little has changed. And thinking, "What was it that baby teacher Jess needed to effectively serve all of her kids?" And then, knowing what I know, having visited so many classrooms across this country, and listening to teachers, and talking to teachers, and observing teachers and principals and school leaders.

And so, early on in the design of our program, I said, "It's not enough that we're meeting with kids every day and teaching kids to read and producing rich data reports. We have to be partnering with our school teams and our district teams to help make them data informed." As my experience, having been a teacher using edtech, having worked for other edtech companies, was that there's a lot of like, "It's in the portal. Just go to the portal."

Annalies Corbin:

Right. Right.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Okay. Well, I've got like a dozen different portals I'm supposed to do, and I don't even know where to begin because I'm drowning in data, and I don't know... Like, make this easier for me.

Annalies Corbin:

I hear that all the time too. It's like really one more thing.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

So, I said to my team, "What if we did data meetings? What if we pull the stakeholders together and we say, 'We have the privilege of working one-on-one with your kids. What a gift. As a result, we're learning a ton about them as learners. Here's the data, and here's what else we can tell you about your kids. Here's what we're doing in order to teach into these gaps. Here's what you could be doing.'"

And we wanted to begin to build these cultures of school teams really being data informed and being able to harness that data, connect dots to other data points within their literacy ecosystem, and then as a result, have a much stronger literacy ecosystem overall.

So, let me give some examples. At the very beginning of the program, the first thing we do are baseline diagnostics. Right there, we get an incredibly rich data snapshot that our partner screener data is not giving them. So, rather than leave anything to chance, like, "Oh yeah, it's in the portal," we're like, "Let's have a baseline data meeting. We're gonna unpack what we learned." So, we're sharing that information from the outset, not only because it then enables teachers to say, "Oh my gosh, no wonder, Annalies was rolling on the rug during my tier one lesson. I'm teaching about digraphs, and she still doesn't know all of her letter names." So, they're gonna get that insight.

Then, for teachers, we have additional instructional resources that are part of our program. We have workbooks, and we're like, "Based on the skill gaps kids have, here are the workbook pages that you could send home for homework. You could have them due as additional center time." However you wanna integrate these resources, they won't be frustrating. They're additional at-bats. It gives kids the opportunity to do more, you know, encoding, writing. So, I'm a classroom teacher, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, you have just made my life so much easier." The problem is I know what you're doing to address it, and you just gave me extra resources that I don't need to Google and try to find on my own or photocopy. And now, I can make simple targeted packets for each of my student. Done.

And then, for the school leaders, as early as a baseline meeting, we can say things like, "Hey, there's a pattern here. 80% of your kiddos that you placed into this intervention have basic alphabet knowledge gaps. And it's the beginning of first grade. Were these kids in your school last year? What can we learn from this? What do you need to start doing right now in kindergarten, so that we don't have to have so many kids needing Ignite Reading next school year because they didn't learn the alphabet in kindergarten?"

So, it's bigger than just the data. It's, okay, so you have the data, let's talk about it, and then let's start making moves right now that can move the needle not only for your Ignite Reading kids, but your entire literacy ecosystem. So, the way that we're doing this work, our partners, and it makes me so proud, is they will say Ignite Reading is the missing ingredient. We're this like between all of the other bricks that they're laying in, in the house of literacy that they're building.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. I love that very much. And it's so incredibly needed and necessary, so I appreciate that. I always like to sort of make sure that as we're having the conversation, especially as we're starting to wrap a conversation, that we talk about the thing that keeps you up at night because this is incredible work, incredible programming, and an amazing opportunity for everyone, teachers, educators, their families, the, the community, right? So, what are you working on or what is the thing that is keeping you up at night that you're contemplating as this is the next thing that we have to tackle with this issue for Ignite Reading or for our partner districts, our community, or the world as a whole? What are you thinking about?

I know it's a big lofty question, but it's a real one because I think it's interesting when I get to talk to founders in particular, right? Founders, we have this tick, right? And this tick, we can cover it up, we can put on whatever we need to so that nobody will

realize it's there, but we're constantly vibrating in the background around that next iteration or that next thing.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Yes.

Annalies Corbin:

What is it for Jessica?

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

So I'm laughing because last night was yet another night where I could not fall asleep because my brain just will not stop, and we could be building one thing in our product roadmap right now, and I am like 200 feet out already imagining the next thing.

Annalies Corbin:

Classic founder.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Yeah, every single time I go, and I visit a school, and I'm in a classroom watching kids do Ignite Reading, and then I'm talking with stakeholders, my mind is just firing off with all of the things. So, it's hard. And it's the gift of being an entrepreneur and like a social impact one at that.

So, to answer your question, a few things. One, this concept of a first-grade promise is something that is beginning to pick up momentum. We had the whole tidal wave of science of reading, what feels like forever ago. So many school systems have adopted programs, trained teachers, they're looking at their data, and they're like, "We checked the boxes, we're doing the things, why is the data not data-ing?" And it's because they're not understanding this deeper nuance that I talked about around its differentiation. You have to nail differentiation, and you've gotta make sure you've got the precision and the dosage, and in my opinion, one-on-one is the best way you're gonna do that, and the fastest, and kids can't wait.

But coupled with that, it's that it's gotta be before third grade. They have to crack the code and be on benchmark fluent readers before they leave first grade. Because the research shows again, and again, and again, my study is not the first study to show this, that if they are on benchmark in phonics in first grade, they are still largely on benchmark each year thereafter.

So, what keeps me up at night is, how do we get this in the water so that every parent knows my child is supposed to be reading by the end of first grade. Every school

system is committing to, we promise that at least 85% of our kids, at least, because that's the most, in my opinion, realistically ambitious bar we can set for first grade, and I've seen it happen in ecosystems. You can do this. But there's gotta be focus around that. And then, policymakers understanding, as well, you need a first grade safety net, and it needs to be high dosage, high impact tutoring.

So, that movement that we're trying to build is what keeps me up at night, because if we can just change hearts and minds and help educate the masses, then I think we can really be on a path to ensuring that every child has the right to learn to read.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. I love that. It's not a bad problem to keep you up at night. It's the right one to be working on, so thank you for that. Jessica, I wanna thank you on behalf of all of our listeners for taking time out of your day to chat with us. We really, really appreciate it. We will make sure that contact information for Ignite Reading is provided in the show notes. And I encourage everybody who has been listening to our conversation, uh, to go to the website, see what it's all about, and to reach out to Jessica and her team if you have questions, if you're curious, demos, all of those sorts of things. So, we wanna make sure that as many kids as possible get the opportunity to be immersed in the world that is available to them if only we can read. So, thank you again for joining us today.

Jessica Reid Sliwerski:

Thank you.

Annalies Corbin:

Change begins with conversations like these. Help us keep them going by following, leaving a review, and sharing Learning Unboxed with your community. Want to keep exploring? Visit passfoundation.org/learning-unboxed.