About 300,000 adults in Greater Hartford may have trouble reading an ATM, a ballot or this cover. This is a problem we can fix.
THE FIRST ‘R’

Joana Smith smiles often in conversation, a big, broad smile that accentuates her freckles. Her long, jet-black hair is pulled away from her face; one less distraction from the work before her on this mid-September day.

After a session with a tutor and word exercises on the computer, Smith pulls out the book “Homes Don’t Just Happen,” and settles down for some quiet reading time. She traces finger underlines each word as she plows forward in the first chapter on the life of Robert H. Lawrence Jr., the first black astronaut in this country.

Reading in a whisper, Smith hesitates in places and turns to the dictionary to look up words she doesn’t know — “cooperation” and “commensurate.” In 15 minutes she finishes two and a half pages.

Smith is a ninth-grade dropout who at 40 desperately wants to learn how to read. She hopes to earn her high-school diploma one day and gain a better job.

Her struggle isn’t uncommon in Greater Hartford, where an estimated 41 percent of adults have low literacy skills. For these adults, it can be difficult to read a street sign, navigate an ATM screen or read a newspaper.

But brain research and other scientific work have revealed the mystery of reading for those who have difficulty, helping us understand not just how we read but what programs work when we’re taught how to read.

For the past year, Smith has been working toward her goal at Read to Succeed, a Hartford adult literacy program that has been praised for its use of science-based reading research.

Smith knows she still has more work to do. She must juggle the demanding program schedule — four days a week, two hours each day — with caring for her chronically ill daughter. She must learn the tedious and often confounding rules of English.

Even so, Smith rarely tires.

She is finally conquering her fear. She is no longer scared of the possibility that others might find out she cannot read. Now, she says, she can easily read her daughter’s prescription bottle.

CHANCES ARE, IF YOU’RE READING this without a problem, you can’t remember when or how you learned to read. For most of us, reading is effortless. We could do it after only a short time of instruction.

But learning to read is a complicated process. Unlike talking, which can be picked up through exposure to the spoken language, reading must be taught. And how it’s taught can mean the difference between a lifetime of reading problems or of reading enjoyment.
Science has fueled a revolution in the understanding of reading that will affect how we identify reading problems and what can be done about them. Even better, says Yale professor and pediatrie Dr. Sally Shaywitz, who struggles with reading—children and adults—can improve.

"The hopeful point is that actually we know how to help these people so they can become better readers," Shaywitz said. "The data indicates if you test these people when they're young, the possibility of really changing their children's lives, ensuring that vast numbers of children who are previously segregated to be poor readers, now have for the first time an opportunity to have reading difficulties remediated and get on the fast track."

As a young pediatrician, Shaywitz remembers seeing parents who talked about their worries. School learning and reading often tapped the last. And she recalls the deep pain suffered by her patients who had trouble reading.

"I think because it's a hidden disability and because people who have it are also very smart and creative, it's very hard for a person who's never had a reading problem...to understand what it can do to a person," she said. "The pain causes it in incredible things, because reading is all around us."

For more than a decade, Shaywitz has delved into reading disabilities and how people read. She has used functional magnetic resonance imaging to watch the brains of individuals as they read. The imaging found that dyslexic readers—one of the most common reading disabilities—have a glitch in the posterior reading area and use different pathways than skilled readers do.

In her book, "Overcoming Dyslexia: A New and Complete Science-Based Program for Reading Problems at Any Level," Shaywitz puts the stereotypes of dyslexia and underrates the need for effective reading programs that include intensive instruction on the fundamentals, such as paying to the sounds of spoken language, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary and phonics.

Without intervention, children with reading difficulties often become adults who must seek out defenses to get through life. Memorizing words is a common tool those with reading disabilities use, while others surround themselves with people who can help them navigate a world filled with words. For Smith, it meant when she worked as a writing manager at a fast food restaurant, she panicked when the computer went down because she couldn't read the instructions.

"That was very tough," she said. "I had to call some other manager from another store, because I couldn't read...I wouldn't tell anybody I didn't know how to read because I felt ashamed and very uncomfortable that people knew I didn't know how to read."

LOW LITERACY DOESN'T just affect the individual. In fact, it's much worse. For instance, statistics show that those with low literacy levels lack sex and are more likely to be poor. The 1992 Hartford Adult Literacy Survey, the most comprehensive such study available, estimated that 21 percent to 23 percent, or 40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in the country have low literacy skills.

Based on that survey, in Hartford, nearly three-quarters of the adults may read below the level needed to be successful in this society. Individuals in this group could have difficulty using a

bass schedule, putting off a job application or determining correct change from information on a menu.

That number increases to about 300,000 adults in Greater Hartford, which includes 34 municipalities surrounding the city, according to a report published by the Greater Hartford Literacy Council this summer. But Shaywitz believes most children and adults who have reading difficulties can learn the program given the right instruction. What science has revealed about reading difficulties can be applied to everyone with reading problems, she argues in her book.

Shaywitz recently published new research that she believes is significant. The data at low-isonormal readers, readers who had a reading problem but later became accurate readers, and persistently poor readers. The research showed that the brains of inaccurate readers and persistently poor readers looked alike when they read words, but that the connections in the brains of the persistently poor readers were different than in good readers. The persistently poor readers relied on memorization, came from less advantaged schools and, Shaywitz supposed, didn't receive the most effective reading programs.

"It may be that the persistently poor readers are folk born with (reading) systems intact but because of environmental situations, like schooling, these systems are not properly activated and they had to rely on rote memory," she said.

It appears that if children are given the appropriate reading programs, since the system is there, they have the potential for becoming good readers, Shaywitz said.

"MY BRAIN GOES BACK TO BEING 5 WHEN I READ...I MAKE A LIVING, BUT I DON'T HAVE A LIFE."

Long before science-based research became a subject of debate in educational circles, Read to Succeed in downtown Hartford was using some of the fundamental principles Shaywitz wrote about in her book. The program began under a partnership with the YMCAs in downtown Hartford and the Hartford Courant, although The Courant no longer contributes money to the program.

Read to Succeed, one of dozens of literacy programs in the region, always looking for ways to obtain funding for students who need financial assistance, said program director Karen Oaks. "The program, which has significantly more people in the decade it has been operating, has become so popular it has a nine-month waiting list with about 37 people on it. One of the focuses of the program is phonemic awareness, which points to the speech sounds in words. For instance, "cat" has three sounds—\( \text{c} - \text{a} - \text{t} \) and eight has two sounds—\( \text{h} - \text{e} \)." Research shows that phonemic awareness is one of the essential requirements in learning to read and that those with a reading disability often show difficulties in this area.

On this summer day, clammy air embraces the room at Read to Succeed. The air-conditioning is broken but the students don't seem to mind. Wedged into an office no larger than a walk-in closet are Smith and her teacher. Side by side, they run through the lessons, first correcting homework, warming up with a recitation of the alphabet and spelling words that are spoken by the teacher. Smith repeats the words, easily saying "s" for sand. She struggles with reading other words, saying "made" for sad. But she corrects herself with some prompting by the teacher and is praised for doing well.

Smith, of Windsor, had her reading problem from her family but it wasn't until she was overwhelmed. Helping her daughter and son with homework became too intimidating. She sought help from a neighbor, who was a teacher. She tried to obtain her high school equivalency diploma and realize that reading was a large obstacle.

"It's like you're lost in the world and you can't find the way where you're going," she said.

Testa Smith, at Read to Success indicated she had a reading disability in the ninth grade and was told to complete her last two years of school, which she did. She continued to do well on standardized tests and graduated from college. She got a job in the medical field, where she reads quickly and efficiently. She is also a volunteer at the YWCA. "I think we're going to do a lot of good, a lot of good, a lot of good, a lot of good."

"The way I compartmentalized. I was everybody's best friend," she said recently, tears welling in his eyes, as he explained his journey to Read to Succeed and the effects of his reading disability.

"It's not going back to being 5 when I read...I make a living, but I don't have a life."
Dave Rice did not learn to read in school as a child. It wasn’t until he was in his 30s that he improved his skills enough to write a letter he could be proud of. Rice built this beautiful house in Elington over looking a cornfield.

Smith noticed a difference. She was gaining confidence, and she began her daughter and son see that learning is important.

“I hope that they will see that now, they have the capability to learn and they can learn,” Smith said. “They can learn a lot.”

AS A CHILD, EZNIA STEVENSON remembers being labeled “autistic” and “lazy” in school. Reading remained a mystery to her. She couldn’t understand why she wasn’t able to learn like her siblings. She graduated high school and went on to earn a college degree, but it wasn’t until she successfully passed her bar exam that she learned how to read at all. In her words, she said she discovered the hidden dyslexia.

“I never asked anyone for help,” she said. “I didn’t want anyone to know that anything was wrong. I was advanced, I felt something was wrong with me and that I was stupid. I believed I solved it and I believed I was okay.”

Shawyer wrote “Overcoming Dyslexia,” in part, to discuss these stereotypes. Research has shown individuals who have dyslexia underachieve in the back seat of the IQ Test, which is the primary area for reading. The glue causes problems with analyzing phonemes, which are the basic sounds that make up words and language. Some students figure out ways to compensate, to use other areas of the brain, such as making a mental map, which allows them to read, but not automatically. It’s a challenge to read and write.

—But being dyslexic isn’t a sign of low intelligence or foolishness. Shawyer readily points to the epilogue of her book which mentions playwright Woody Harrelson, former CNN Charlie Schwob and writer John Irving— all who have dyslexia.

“Reading is everywhere, and because most of us can learn to read without difficulty—we take it for granted,” Shawyer said. “How can anyone not read and especially how can anyone be treated and not read? Our society wants reading for everyone to be able to read, and there are more ways of achieving it than ever before.”

— Nancy Brylakovicz, director of the Read to Succeed program at the University of Wisconsin, says that 20-30% of children fail to read at grade level. She is working to help all children reach their full potential.

Brylakovicz grew up in an affluent town just south of Birmingham, Ala., where her father was in the state legislature. Every Sunday, the family visited the library with her father, opening up books to look at their pictures. But reading wasn’t a part of the experience.

She remembers being in the slow reading group as a first-grader and the self-consciousness she felt when she couldn’t read a new word and had to be connected. But the got used to the drill — 匹配的技能或技能 — will tell you what it is.

Her mother knew Brylakovicz didn’t read like her other children. Brylakovicz had some tutoring and passed high school, but reading remained a struggle. In college, she majored in physical education and earned a bachelor’s degree. She went through many different tests to find her multiple choice.

In the mid-90s, when Brylakovicz was managing Camp Caine at the YMCA, she began a new chapter in her life when she married Greenwood.

“I was 19 when [I married] Eric in 1999. The opportunity was there,” Brylakovicz said. “I knew somebody that said she could help me. They forced me for the first time in my life to read a new word.”

— How different is her life seven years later?Look around her house for a clue. She is a member of the National Reading Association, the National Reading Council and the National Institute for Literacy.

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