



# Putting the Pieces of the Puzzle Together

How Systematic Vocabulary Instruction and Expanded Learning Time Can Address the Literacy Gap

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# Introduction and summary

The research on expanded learning time in school has shown that time spent beyond the traditional school day can play an important role in influencing student achievement by providing students with additional time to master certain skills and topics and to expose them to enriching activities. Expanded learning time policies that implement systematic vocabulary instruction can be especially beneficial for struggling readers and writers. Vocabulary knowledge has been identified as the most important indicator of oral language proficiency, which is particularly important for the comprehension of both spoken and written language.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, general vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of reading comprehension. The interdependence of word knowledge and reading comprehension increases as students advance through school.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, many low-income children and English language learners have limited word knowledge, which negatively affects their reading comprehension in the upper elementary and middle school grades.<sup>3</sup> As early as the first grade, children from higher-income families know at least twice as many words as children from less affluent families.<sup>4</sup> As students advance in grade level, the materials they read become more difficult, and students who lack academic language can neither access nor comprehend these texts. We have only to consider the typical high-poverty school, where approximately half of incoming ninth-grade students read two or three years below grade level.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, children who are learning English often enter kindergarten lagging behind their English-only peers in the skills necessary to start reading, with the gap remaining throughout their school years. For English language learners in particular, the traditional school schedule often fails to provide enough opportunities for them to catch up.

So how can policymakers and practitioners address disparities in vocabulary and spoken language based on children's family income and English-language proficiency? We will address this question with three recommendations:

**(1) To close the literacy gap in the elementary and middle grades, schools should consider using systematic vocabulary instruction throughout the school day and during expanded learning time.** Lower-income children who need preparation in academic language and exposure to texts that promote academic vocabulary are not getting enough

of either type of instruction. Explicit vocabulary instruction rarely occurs in schools, and when it does it appears to be insufficient for promoting word growth and increased comprehension of text.<sup>6</sup>

Our primary recommendation is for educators and educational leadership to provide school-wide systematic vocabulary instruction for low-income children and English language learners. This is not a new idea: During the War on Poverty in the 1960s, there were calls for systematic instruction in vocabulary for disadvantaged students as one of the mechanisms for increasing academic achievement.<sup>7</sup>

As late as the fifth grade, children learn almost 80 percent of new words as a result of direct explanation, usually by a teacher.<sup>8</sup> This is good news because it underscores the effectiveness of teacher-directed instruction in improving vocabulary and comprehension. Interventions that specifically target vocabulary learning have shown promising results for at-risk children and should be a primary component of expanded learning time.

Because of time constraints during the traditional school day, many literacy blocks tend to promote *some* of the skills associated with early reading over others. Skills such as phonological awareness and decoding are vital for reading comprehension, but vocabulary knowledge and familiarity with text structures are crucial as well. It may be accurate to claim that a great part of the achievement gap is in fact a vocabulary gap. This gap, we argue, can be narrowed through more time spent on developing this crucial language base.

**(2) To implement systematic vocabulary instruction, educators need to accomplish three goals: sustain a school-wide vocabulary program, assess student knowledge, and help teachers target the right words during instruction.** By optimally using extended learning time to accelerate effective vocabulary and academic language instruction, teachers can help all students at all grade levels develop the kinds of language skills crucial to academic success.

- There is a need to focus on creating and sustaining a school-wide approach to systematic vocabulary instruction—with features known to work—while simultaneously expanding instructional time. Designing and implementing an effective language intervention that crosses grade levels is a challenging enterprise in underperforming schools with low levels of academic achievement and incoherent organizational structures.<sup>9</sup> Interventions work best if they initially receive wide support by leadership and practitioners and clearly address a district, school-identified, or nominated concern.<sup>10</sup> If limited vocabulary knowledge has been identified by district leaders as an impediment to children's reading abilities and access to content area texts, that consensus allows for a targeted and thoughtful approach to the challenge at hand.

- Assessing vocabulary knowledge is crucial to targeting the words children need to know to do well in school. There are written and oral vocabulary measures that provide some meaningful evaluation of a child's vocabulary. But written vocabulary assessments are limited because they measure word knowledge through reading comprehension assessments or target words that do not give a real picture of the breadth and depth of a child's actual vocabulary. In the case of designing programs or interventions, assessing students' vocabulary knowledge must be closely linked to each school's instructional and curricular goals.
- Educators are not in the position to teach the sheer number of words struggling readers need to know to access school texts, participate in academically productive discussions, or produce academic writing. Therefore, it is paramount to target the kinds of words that students are likely to encounter in textbooks and on tests and explicitly teach these across content areas.

**(3) Expanded learning time policies may enhance systematic vocabulary instruction's effectiveness for low-income children and English language learners.**<sup>11</sup> It is clear that we need more planned curricula, more vocabulary learning and teaching, and more time to do both—especially for children attending high-poverty schools. Embedding systematic vocabulary and literacy instruction in high-poverty schools that expand learning time holds significant promise for closing literacy gaps.

Although there are few studies that specifically examine the effects of systematic vocabulary instruction within an expanded learning time policy, research suggests that such an approach would accelerate the vocabulary and comprehension gains of struggling readers.

Recent evaluations of systematic vocabulary instruction during the regular school day have produced positive impacts on children's vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills. It is therefore reasonable for us to assume that implementing systematic vocabulary instruction in an expanded learning time curriculum would have equally positive effects on student outcomes. Our review of three studies in this report suggests that even expanded learning time policies that provide systematic literacy instruction in the early grades have clear benefits for low-income children and English language learners.

The powerful combination of systematic vocabulary instruction and expanded learning time has the potential to address the large and long-standing literacy gaps in U.S. public schools. But ultimately, evidence from a rigorous experimental study is needed to determine whether the combination of systematic vocabulary instruction and expanded learning time could help close and eliminate literacy gaps.





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