

August 2007

ASCD report

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Developing a Systems Process for Improving Instruction in Vocabulary:

Lessons Learned

*Michael Dunn, Barbara
Bonner, and Lynne Huske*

Developing a Systems Process for Improving Instruction in Vocabulary: Lessons Learned



Michael Dunn, Barbara Bonner, and Lynne Huske

The purpose of this paper is to authenticate the U-46 systemwide process for implementing a district focus on teaching vocabulary through direct instruction. Specifically, the district goal implements Robert Marzano's (2004) six-step process of teaching and building academic vocabulary in kindergarten through 12th grade. This district initiative is part of a wider focus on providing academic success for all students in literacy and numeracy.

District Overview

Located 45 miles west of downtown Chicago, U-46 is the second largest public school system in the state of Illinois. It covers 90 square miles and serves students in 11 municipalities. Since 1995, the area has witnessed incredible growth that has resulted in an increase of 10,200 students.

During the 2006–07 school year, some 41,000 students were educated in the district's eight preschools, forty K–6 elementary schools, eight 7–8 middle schools, five 9–12 high schools, and one alternative high school.

A diverse group of students fills the U-46 classrooms with backgrounds representing more than 60 cultures. More than half of the population is minority, 35 percent come from low-income households, and 6,000 are English language learners (ELLs). The diversity of the district can be broken down as follows:

- 42.80 percent Caucasian
- 40.97 percent Hispanic
- 6.84 percent African American
- 7.55 percent Asian American
- 1.72 percent multiracial
- 0.11 percent Native American

Racial diversity is only part of the district profile, however. Twelve percent of the students receive some type of special education services, and 35 percent live

in low-income households. These factors, along with a 16 percent mobility rate, all influence how the district determines the best way to ensure students receive a high-quality education.

Meeting the needs of this varied student population are 2,474 teachers and 197 administrators. The staff is hardworking and dedicated to helping all students attain academic success. The teachers have an average of 13.5 years' experience; 60 percent have continued their education and have a master's degree.

Through all the population changes and growth, the district's goal has remained the same: to help all of our children realize and maximize their individual potential to become responsible, productive, and contributing members of our community and society.

This goal was severely challenged in 2003 when U-46 faced several major issues that made the district extremely vulnerable to failure and a lack of public confidence. The board of education and central office administrators had to take immediate action on these issues, which included

- The discovery of a \$40 million deficit.
- The placement of 24 schools on the state watch/warning list.
- Student enrollment growth that averaged 1,000 new students a year.
- A critical need to provide new programs and services for the growing diverse population.
- A weak tax base.
- A shortfall in state funding.

A New Beginning

During the 2002–03 school year, the Stupski Foundation initiated a partnership with U-46. The foundation, located in the San Francisco Bay Area, provides assistance mostly to urban school districts across the country with the aim of increasing academic success for all while closing the achievement gap. The foundation's assistance allowed the district to provide staff development and support for central office leadership, principals, and teachers and district operations. The foundation also supported the development of a District Literacy Roadmap, which became the underpinning of a common curriculum that led to increased student achievement. During the past five years, this partnership has resulted in academic achievement for U-46 students. All elementary schools are now making adequate yearly progress.

Why a Districtwide Focus on Vocabulary?

The District Literacy Roadmap is based on five strands critical to literacy development, instruction, and student achievement:

- Phonics/Word Study
- Vocabulary
- Fluency
- Comprehension
- Writing

With vocabulary as one of the strands, the district needed to create a staff development program that included research- and evidence-based strategies for improving instruction and achievement in vocabulary.

In addition to the roadmap requirement, the districtwide focus on vocabulary instruction also stemmed from several research findings. Researchers have documented the relationship between students' knowledge of a rich and meaningful vocabulary and comprehension for all students. Cunningham and Stanovich (1977) found that vocabulary assessed in 1st grade predicted over 30 percent of the variance in comprehension for 11th grade students. A meta-analysis conducted by Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) indicated that improved comprehension is related to direct vocabulary instruction. Researchers found that on average, students who had placed at the 50th percentile in reading comprehension scored 30 percentile points higher after receiving direct vocabulary instruction.

Further, evidence suggests that direct vocabulary instruction is often overlooked in daily teaching activities. A review of the five most widely used basal reading programs indicates that none provided the sustained vocabulary instruction needed for increased reading comprehension (Walsh, 2003). Classroom observation studies document the fact that teachers spent little time in direct vocabulary instruction (Durkin, 1979; Rosner & Juel, 1982; Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003).

As indicated earlier, the district has a large population of ELL students and students from low-income households. Increasing evidence suggests that vocabulary knowledge is important for both groups. Many children from low-wealth areas enter school with vocabularies smaller than those of their middle-class counterparts (Graves, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995; Marzano, 2004). For English language learners, achievement in academic vocabulary is crucial for school success (Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; Marzano & Pickering, 2005). Finally, when teachers use direct teaching strategies, students demonstrate growth in vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Blachowicz & Obrocta, 2005; Carlo et al., 2004; Marzano, 2005; Silverman, 2007).

These facts and the overall value to students demonstrated a clear need for U-46 to focus on vocabulary instruction.

The Process

After reviewing the research on vocabulary and recognizing the importance of vocabulary instruction, the district focused on Marzano's six-step process for teaching academic vocabulary:

- Providing a description, explanation, or example of the new term.
- Asking students to restate the description, explanation, or example in their own words.
- Asking students to construct a picture, symbol, or graphic representing the term.
- Periodically engaging students in activities that help them add to their knowledge of terms in their notebooks.
- Frequently asking students to discuss the terms with one another.
- Regularly involving students in games that allow them to play with terms.

The rationale and detailed explanation of this interactive approach to teaching vocabulary is found in two sources: *Building Academic Vocabulary Teacher's Manual* (Marzano & Pickering, 2005) and *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools* (Marzano, 2004).

In December 2004, U-46 administrators invited Robert Marzano to discuss his project in developing students' background knowledge and vocabulary with a small group of staff members. After discussing the concepts Marzano presented, the group of teachers and administrators determined that students in U-46 would benefit from a district approach to teaching academic vocabulary. In the summer of 2005, approximately 100 district teachers representing kindergarten through grade 12 attended a two-day workshop designed to develop an initial list of academic vocabulary words by grade level and content areas. The teachers designed this list using *Building Academic Vocabulary Teacher's Manual* (Marzano & Pickering, 2005), the Illinois State Learning Standards, and district curriculum materials. These initial lists were placed on the District Literacy Roadmap Web site (www.u-46.org) to ensure easy and timely access for all staff members. Because of the large Hispanic population within the district, the list was also made available to staff in Spanish.

During the 2005–06 school year, administrators encouraged and supported teachers in using the six-step process to teach the U-46 academic vocabulary list. Assistance included

- Special presentations led by the external literacy consultant for district administrators, ELL staff, high school department chairs, and district and building coaches to ensure their understanding and support their work with teachers.
- Districtwide grade-level staff development days conducted by district-level coaches. The staff development focused on 3rd through 8th grade teachers and high school reading teachers. The district designed the sessions to bring all teachers—including regular classroom teachers, ELL teachers, and special education teachers at each grade level—together so they would all implement the same instructional approaches.
- Development of the district Web site that included teaching tools such as a lesson plan design, examples from district classrooms, and vocabulary research summaries.
- Support to building principals in implementing the process schoolwide. This resulted in the development of district student notebooks for keeping track of target words taught.

In the summer of 2006, administrators held a second districtwide workshop attended by more than 125 staff members, where they

- Reviewed and revised the word list.
- Reviewed the various record-keeping prototypes and recommended one unified format.
- Recommended follow-up steps for engaging the entire U-46 staff in the teaching process.

Based on this work, the district made the following changes and additions during the 2006–07 school year:

- Placed the staff-revised vocabulary list on the District Roadmap Web site in English and Spanish.
- Bought a binder for each student in the district to keep track of the academic words list, using one of three approved formats: primary, intermediate, or middle/high school. Because the binders and student pages were supplied by the district, individual building-level budgets were not affected.
- Invited the external consultant to present a two-hour overview at the August orientation workshop for all principals, covering the research and process that the district used in planning and implementing the teaching of academic vocabulary for the 2006–07 school year. This workshop allowed principals to ask clarifying questions regarding the process and research.
- Invited the external literacy consultant to conduct a full-day workshop for selected principals, department heads, and all coaches. This workshop provided the group with common materials and a PowerPoint presentation

- to use during the opening day activities, which all staff members attended.
- Had teams consisting of a building principal or department head and a coach present an overview and the six-step process of teaching academic vocabulary to fellow staff members at grade and department meetings prior to the first day of school. The teams used two DVDs published by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development—*A Six-Step Process for Teaching Vocabulary* (2005) and *Building Background Knowledge Through Wide Reading: A Five Step Process* (2006)—to supplement the presentation material.
 - Continued to have district-level coaches provide staff development activities to support all teachers implementing the academic vocabulary process.

Lessons Learned

Develop and communicate a consistent message to all staff members.

During brief opening day remarks to the staff, Superintendent Connie Neal set the stage for the consistent message regarding the importance of this project. Next, administrators and teachers presented a three-hour workshop highlighting a common set of materials and message in grade-level and content-area meetings. Throughout the year, coaches conducted district roadmap staff development and building touchback sessions stressing the importance of teaching academic vocabulary through the six-step process.

Provide a systemwide network to support staff growth and feedback.

Without the efforts and active listening of the coaches and the support of district and building administrators, the scaling up of the project would be difficult. The coaches provided district-level staff development and building-level touchback sessions on implementing the required teaching strategies. They also provided classroom modeling of the process when needed, assisted teachers in making meaningful modifications to the strategy, and made and distributed the games and activities needed for step six in the process.

The high school department chairs were helpful and supportive in implementing the strategy at the secondary level. They gave teachers the opportunity to discuss the implementation of the process at department meetings and provided ongoing support to staff members. Currently, the 11th grade American History and 10th grade writing curricula are under revision. As part of the process, the teachers reviewed the academic vocabulary list for words that fit these areas and made appropriate alterations. Now building background knowledge and vocabulary takes priority in the district curriculum revision process.

Use technology as a tool for scaling up.

At the outset of the project, the district did not consider the use of technology in implementation. As work moved forward, it became clear that technology had two major functions: to update teachers on curriculum work and news in the district and to disseminate finished curriculum products and resource information to teachers. The district created a Web site that provides staff with a wealth of resources to support teachers. The site includes brief research summaries, the academic vocabulary lists, example lessons from U-46 classrooms, and links to resources. Records indicate that, on average, 18,000 pages are accessed per month.

During roadmap staff development days, the coaches regularly demonstrated to teachers how to find information on the site and how they could use video streaming to provide students with experiences to build their background knowledge. District data indicate that teacher traffic to the Web site increased after each staff development day.

Expect and respect staff questions regarding the process.

When bringing a project to scale, teachers have many questions. Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, and Watts-Taffe (2006) identified a host of questions that teachers often ask regarding vocabulary instruction. As the academic vocabulary project moved ahead, teachers and administrators had the following questions:

- What does research tell us about good vocabulary instruction?
- What are the critical words teachers need to teach?
- What specific strategies are most helpful to students in learning new words?
- How can teachers use technology in teaching new words?
- Are the strategies used for teaching English-speaking students the ones teachers should use with ELL students?
- How do we assess and document student growth in vocabulary?
- Is this initiative here to stay?

In all cases, the external consultant, the district and building administrators, and the coaches provided timely and consistent responses to these questions at roadmap staff development and building touchback days. Answering questions and providing teachers with background information helped them to succeed in using the strategies. The district Web site also proved helpful in answering instructional questions and supporting professional development activities.

Conclusion

Implementing change and bringing a project to scale is a daunting challenge, particularly in a large district like U-46. The teaching staff needs continued support and encouragement. The great care we took when initializing the project showed in the increased student achievement on the 2006 state-mandated assessment. Overall, students in U-46 continue to move closer to the district goal of academic success for all. In fact, the district and all its elementary schools made adequate yearly progress.

To continue its improvement, the district needs to follow the findings of Correnti and Rowan (2007). In examining patterns of literacy instruction in successful schools, they found that huge changes in teachers' instructional practices are supported by on-site facilitators and local leaders. In U-46, these roles are played by the coaches and the superintendent, chief academic officer, and building administrators.

References

- Beck, I., & McKeown, M. (2007). Increasing young low-income children's oral vocabulary repertoires through rich and focused instruction. *The Elementary School Journal*, *107*, 251–271.
- Blachowicz, C., Fisher, P., Ogle, D., & Watts-Taffe, S. (2006). Vocabulary: Questions from the classroom. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *41*, 524–539.
- Blachowicz, C., & Obrochta, C. (2005). Vocabulary visits: Virtual field trips for content vocabulary development. *Reading Teacher*, *59*, 262–268.
- Carlo, M., August, D., McLaughlin, B., Snow, C., Dressler, C., Lippman, D., Lively, T., & White, C. (2004). Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English language learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *39*, 188–215.
- Carlo, M., August, D., & Snow, C. (2005). Sustained vocabulary-learning strategy instruction for English-language learners. In E. Hiebert and M. Kamil (Eds.), *Teaching and learning vocabulary: Bringing research to practice* (pp. 137–154). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Correnti, R., & Rowan, B. (2007). Opening up the black box: Literacy instruction in schools participating in three comprehensive school reform programs. *American Educational Research Journal*, *44*, 298–338.
- Cunningham, A., & Stanovich, K. (1977). Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later. *Developmental Psychology*, *33*, 934–945.
- Durkin, D. (1979). What classroom observations reveal about comprehension instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *14*, 481–533.
- Graves, M. (2006). *The vocabulary book: Learning and instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.
- Marzano, R. (2004). *Building background knowledge for academic achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Marzano, R. (2005). *Preliminary report on the 2004–05 evaluation study of the ASCD program for building academic vocabulary*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Marzano, R., & Pickering, D. (2005). *Building academic vocabulary teacher's manual*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- Rosner, N., & Juel, C. (1982). Effects of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension. In J. Niles and L. Harris (Eds.), *Yearbook of the National Reading Conference: Vol. 31. New inquiries in reading research and instruction* (pp. 110–118). Rochester, NY: National Reading Conference.
- Scott, J., Jamieson-Noel, D., & Asselin, M. (2003). Vocabulary instruction throughout the day in twenty-three Canadian upper-elementary classrooms. *Elementary School Journal, 103*, 269–286.
- Silverman, R. D. (2007). Vocabulary development of English-language and English-only learners in kindergarten. *The Elementary School Journal, 107*, 365–384.
- Stahl, S., & Fairbanks, M. (1986, Spring). The effects of vocabulary instruction: A model-based meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 56*, 72–110.
- Walsh, K. (2003). Basal readers: The lost opportunity to build the knowledge that propels comprehension. *American Educator, 25*, 24–27.

Authors' Contact Information

Michael Dunn
Literacy Consultant
904 S. Dymond Rd.
Libertyville, IL 60048 USA
E-mail: mdunnrldg@aol.com

Barbara Bonner
Chief Academic Officer
Illinois School District U-46
355 E. Chicago Street
Elgin, IL 60120 USA
Phone: 1-847-888-5000, ext. 5203

Lynne Huske
Website Coordinator
Illinois School District U-46
355 E. Chicago Street
Elgin, IL 60120 USA
Phone: 1-847-888-5000, ext. 4071



Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1703 North Beauregard Street
Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA
Phone: 1-800-933-ASCD (2723) or 1-703-578-9600
Fax: 1-703-575-5400

This report is available on the ASCD Web site at www.ascd.org/academicvocabulary.

© 2007 by Michael Dunn, Barbara Bonner, and Lynn Huske. Reproduced with permission.