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# ASCD report

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

## Four Steps to Creating a Statewide Vocabulary Program:


### The Tennessee Academic Vocabulary Project

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# Four Steps to Creating a Statewide Vocabulary Program: The Tennessee Academic Vocabulary Project



*Connie Mayo and Deborah Boyd*

The purpose of this report is to document Tennessee’s initiative to develop and implement a statewide academic vocabulary. This vocabulary, based on Tennessee’s standards and assessments, has been designed to address the achievement gaps among groups of students whose backgrounds are vastly different.

## Introduction

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Tennessee is a land of contrasts. From the rugged eastern heights of Mountain City to the alluvial flood plain of Memphis in the west, the elevation ranges from 6,300 feet above sea level to a mere 185 feet. Between these extremes lie low ridges, plateaus, rolling terrain, and plains. As striking as Tennessee’s geographic diversity is the broad range of socioeconomic levels within the state’s boundaries. One of the wealthiest counties in the United States, Tennessee’s Williamson County boasts a median household income of nearly \$70,000 (Highest-Income Counties, n.d.). At the other extreme, Lake County and Hancock County are among the 100 poorest counties in the nation, with median household incomes of around \$20,000 (Lowest-Income Counties, n.d.).

This economic diversity presents a challenge to Tennessee educators at all levels, from the classroom to the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), in providing opportunities that simultaneously address the needs of children from high-poverty homes and those from affluent ones. Although islands of prosperity exist within the state, the general economic landscape of Tennessee reveals that poverty is an educational factor to be considered in any educational endeavor, analysis, or comparison of student achievement.

Recognizing this economic diversity, the TDOE examined the research on the academic needs of students from high-poverty homes. Their findings supported the pressing need to address the academic vocabulary gap as educators

struggle to close the achievement gap between high and low socioeconomic groups. In study after study, students in lower socioeconomic circumstances found themselves at a learning disadvantage compounded by their lack of academic vocabulary. These differences surface early in life and are demonstrated when students from high-poverty homes arrive at school lacking the quality and quantity of experiences with words and concepts of their classmates from more economically advantaged homes. Measured in words heard per hour, children in lower socioeconomic groups have less than one-third of the early experience of children in higher socioeconomic groups—616 words to 2,153 (Hart & Risley, 1995, p. 197).

Graves, Brunetti, and Slater (1982) examined 1st through 3rd graders' knowledge of the 5,044 most frequent words, focusing on the children's economic status. They found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds knew 1,800 of the most frequent words, while children from middle-class backgrounds knew 2,700 words from the list. This lack of academic vocabulary translates into lower academic achievement that leaves those students constantly struggling to keep up, much less to excel. This gap can be addressed through instruction and experience, but students with poor vocabularies—including those from diverse cultures and economic levels and those with learning disabilities—need strong and systematic educational support to become successful, independent word learners. Vocabulary acquisition is crucial to academic development. Not only do students need a rich body of word knowledge to succeed in basic skill areas, but they also need a specialized vocabulary to learn content area material (Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995, p. 22). While many schools teach vocabulary through rote memorization of words and definitions, that method has proven the least effective instructional method, resulting in little long-term effect (Kaméenui, Dixon, & Carnine, 1987). Teaching specific terms in a specific way, however, is probably the strongest action a teacher can take to ensure that students have the academic background knowledge they need to understand the content they will encounter in school (Marzano & Pickering, 2005).

The research analysis, coupled with state achievement test scores, led the department to initiate the development of the Tennessee Academic Vocabulary Project. The project's design addressed the goal of providing meaningful learning for all Tennessee students, with the purpose of ultimately lessening or closing the achievement gap among student groups.

With this goal and the research in mind, the leadership team determined that Tennessee would develop and implement an academic vocabulary for grades K–10. This project has the capability of affecting the learning of 900,000 Tennessee students by giving 59,000 educators specific terms to teach and a specific structure with which to teach them. The vocabulary, developed by Tennessee classroom educators and based on the Tennessee Curriculum

Framework in all assessed content areas (reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies), is a recommended list of terms for each grade level. The lists are designed to be cumulative. The power of the project lies in building the core academic vocabulary in each assessed content area throughout a student's school career.

## Project Description

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The Tennessee Academic Vocabulary is composed of approximately 30 words or terms per assessed content area, per grade level, in grades K–5. In grades 6–10, the terms are by specific course (e.g., 30 words for Algebra II and 30 words for Geometry).

Although the vocabulary initiative has been time-consuming, the initial response from system and school personnel indicates that making the investment in helping students develop a common academic vocabulary holds promise for closing the achievement gap in Tennessee. The keys to success in Tennessee have been (a) the expertise of the educators in the development process, (b) the support and active involvement of state leadership, (c) the involvement of Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) authors and staff, and (d) the research and resources available through ASCD.

Tennessee is a relatively small state where a number of organizations and agencies often collaborate to accomplish tasks. The Tennessee Academic Vocabulary began as a project of the Curriculum and Instruction Division of the TDOE; however, the scope quickly broadened to include personnel and resources of the TDOE Professional Development Division, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), the Tennessee Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (TASCD), and ASCD. These alliances have served to strengthen the project, disseminate the product, facilitate the teacher training, and make the project replicable nationwide.

## Development and Implementation

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### **Phase 1: Planning**

Once the leadership team identified vocabulary as the project focus, they began their search for the most effective way to address vocabulary statewide. This involved researching and selecting the most effective development and implementation resources available. After reviewing available materials, the leadership team chose to base the project on the work of Robert Marzano and Debra

Pickering. Their work on the essential nature of background knowledge and building this knowledge through structured instruction in academic vocabulary provided a close fit for the team's goals. Their process, outlined in *Building Academic Vocabulary: Teacher's Manual* (Marzano & Pickering, 2005), is a research-based, logical, and sequential structure for developing and teaching a common academic vocabulary.

ASCD was the obvious source for training and implementation resources because of its related publications—*Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools* and *Building Academic Vocabulary*—and subject-area expertise. The team found additional ASCD resources through a close working relationship with the regional ASCD program manager, who was available at all times to answer questions and give implementation advice. With the assistance of Marzano, Pickering, and ASCD, the team identified other vocabulary resources that were reasonably priced and coordinated with the Marzano and Pickering process.

The planning phase also included committee participant selection, work with Marzano, and the myriad paperwork required by the state. Planning began in late fall of 2005 and is ongoing. Because Tennessee was the first state to undertake a statewide vocabulary project based on the work of Marzano and Pickering, no roadmap existed to guide the planning and implementation on a statewide level.

## **Phase 2: Participant Selection**

Educator buy-in is vital in a project of this scope, and significant support was almost immediate. When the first notification went out to system administrators that the initiative was in the planning process and that the department would be contacting teachers from their systems to participate, more than 50 unsolicited e-mails came in the next day from system directors and instructional supervisors endorsing the plan and requesting the opportunity to participate. This initial buy-in reinforced the leadership team's conviction that they were addressing a known need. School system buy-in was just the beginning. Project leaders Deborah Boyd and Connie Mayo in the TDOE's Office of Curriculum and Instruction sought support from other state agencies, including the state teacher association and teacher education institutions.

Charged with program development and implementation, Boyd and Mayo gathered a committee of approximately 60 teacher leaders representing all geographic regions of the state, urban and rural schools, affluent and underprivileged schools, and various ethnicities. The committee selection process focused on classroom teachers who were experts in the Tennessee Curriculum Framework. The search for these expert participants centered on National

Board–Certified teachers, teachers who had won statewide awards and honors, and those nominated by award-winning administrators. In addition, 12 committee facilitators from teacher education universities, the Tennessee Education Association, the Tennessee State Board of Education, and school system administrations from across the state were chosen.

### **Phase 3: Developing the Vocabulary**

All committee members received copies of *Building Academic Vocabulary* to read prior to the first meeting. This ensured they would enter the process with their own background knowledge, prepared for the initiative in which they were participating. The initial committee meeting took place on March 1, 2006, with 85 enthusiastic educators (including departmental staff) participating. The group was divided into small groups by grade and/or content area and armed with copies of the *Tennessee Curriculum Framework*.

At this first meeting, Marzano briefly summarized his books *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement* and *Building Academic Vocabulary* for the participants. Using clips from the DVD *A Six-Step Process for Teaching Vocabulary*, he led the committee through the development process. Committee members also used *Building Academic Vocabulary* as they worked in grade-level and content-area subgroups. These ASCD tools were invaluable in the initial development of the terms list.

Under Marzano’s instruction and guidance, the grade and content-area groups used their considerable experience that day to develop draft word lists based on their specific curriculum standards. Their assignment was to propose lists of terms they considered necessary knowledge for the grade and content specified. Although the goal for each group was a list of about 30 terms, the first drafts could contain additional terms to allow for the inevitable overlap between grades or courses that would have to be resolved during the list development.

When the groups had completed this assignment, Marzano took the results and analyzed them for overlaps or redundancies. He returned a report containing the completed first drafts of the lists to the TDOE with questions noted. The project leaders worked to answer questions and resolve ambiguities in the terms themselves and the intent of the committee groups. This iterative process with Marzano refined the lists and produced second drafts for review.

Early in May 2006, a subcommittee of approximately 12 members from the initial committee reconvened to examine these reports and make final decisions, assigning duplicated terms to grade levels and content areas. These final decisions were then delivered to Marzano, who created the final document for distribution and posting on the TDOE Web site. Copies were distributed to districts

during the last week of June 2006. This completed the development process and left the department with the next task—launching the initiative.

#### **Phase 4: Implementing the Instructional Model**

The development of these lists represented only an early step in making this vocabulary a part of every Tennessee teacher's workday and every Tennessee student's school experience. A list of terms with no recommended process for their acquisition would be of little value; however, teaching specific terms in a specific way would be the logical outgrowth of developing and publishing the vocabulary. This final phase involved training educators across the state in the instructional model recommended by Marzano and Pickering (2005). Their model for acquisition gives value, usability, and strength to the developed vocabulary.

As the summer progressed, all staff members of the Curriculum and Instruction Division of the TDOE used every opportunity to inform teachers and school leaders about the project. During the TASC Annual Conference in July 2006, Debra Pickering provided Tennessee educators their initial introduction to the instructional model during a full-day session for 350 administrators from across the state. As a follow-up, Pickering returned to Tennessee that fall as the keynote speaker at the annual state educational leadership conference, delivering a one-hour overview of the project. In a second session at the same conference, she demonstrated the instructional process she and Marzano recommend for teaching the vocabulary. All of these information avenues served to increase interest and awareness among teachers and administrators.

The final rollout of the project occurred in October 2006. Approximately 80 educators—including teachers, administrators, TDOE staff, and professional developers from the state teacher association—convened with Pickering for a two-day, intensive train-the-trainer session using the Marzano and Pickering instructional model. Each of the 80 trainers received a copy of *Building Academic Vocabulary* and the DVD *A Six-Step Process for Teaching Vocabulary* for their use as they train educators statewide in the recommended instructional model. Immediately after the rollout in October 2006, ASCD provided schools and systems with the opportunity to purchase the same two training tools at a reduced bundle price, making the materials more accessible to all schools.

## Conclusion

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Although this vocabulary is not a mandated part of the state's curriculum, it is based on the curriculum frameworks in each of the assessed content areas. For the vocabulary instruction to be effective and consistent across the state, training must be ongoing. Trained personnel are now available for workshops and college classes across the state. The interest is there; teachers and administrators are requesting training. Because this project is still in its infancy, student achievement improvement cannot yet be linked to the Tennessee Academic Vocabulary Project. Leaders are currently implementing a study to determine that relationship, and another white paper will be released when that study has been completed.

ASCD has been a valued partner in this statewide endeavor. Their authors (Marzano and Pickering), print resources (*Building Academic Vocabulary*), multimedia resources (*A Six-Step Process for Teaching Vocabulary* DVD), and guidance made implementation of this project a success. The only change the leadership team might have made would have been to contact the ASCD office at the inception of the project for advice on planning and organizing the project. ASCD's tools have played an important part in creating a strong vocabulary program for Tennessee.

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## Resources

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This report is available on the ASCD Web site at [www.ascd.org/academicvocabulary](http://www.ascd.org/academicvocabulary).