

FACT SHEET: New Steps by the Administration to Help Parents “Bridge the Word Gap”

October 16, 2014

“We know that right now during the first three years of life, a child born into a low-income family hears 30 million fewer words than a child born into a well-off family. By giving more of our kids access to high-quality pre-school and other early learning programs, and by helping parents get the tools they need to help their kids succeed, we can give those kids a better shot at the career they are capable of, and a life that will make us all better off.”

This is one of my top priorities. I want to thank the growing coalition of researchers, non-profits, and foundations who have made it theirs. This week, I am challenging even more Americans to join this effort. Let’s find new ways to deliver a world class education to our children, bridge the word gap, and put more young people on path to success.”

- President Obama, June 25, 2014, on [Bridging the Word Gap](#)

Earlier this year, President Obama highlighted the importance of supporting learning in our youngest children to bridge the “word gap” and improve their chances for success in school and in life, and he called for an all-hands-on-deck effort to make progress on this issue.

Research shows that during the first three years of life, a poor child hears roughly 30 million fewer total words than his or her more affluent peers. This is known as the “word gap,” and it can lead to disparities not just in vocabulary size, but also in school readiness, long-term educational and health outcomes, earnings, and family stability, even decades later.

Today, the Administration is announcing a coordinated effort by the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to help parents on this critical issue:

- HHS will challenge innovators by sponsoring an “incentive prize” to build low-cost technologies that help parents engage in more high-quality verbal interaction with their young children;
- HHS will support a new research network to help connect academics from multiple disciplines to contribute to word gap solutions;
- ED and HHS will work with the twenty Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge states to address the word gap and support sharing of best practices;
- HHS, in partnership with ED and Too Small to Fail, will develop a Word Gap Toolkit that will include a suite of resources for parents, caregivers, and teachers on enriching the language environment of our youngest children;
- IMLS will work with Reach Out and Read (ROR) to create a “prescription to the library” that provides a new way for pediatricians to encourage reading and library use, as well as a deeper partnership to address the word gap that will likely include over 150 libraries and 75 museums;
- ED and HHS will co-develop a toolkit to help parents identify high-quality early learning programs; and

- HHS and ED with a host of philanthropic partners will announce a \$2 million contract awarded to the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a study on policies that best support the development and educational success of young children who are dual and English Language Learners.

Today, the Administration, along with Too Small to Fail and the Urban Institute, is hosting a White House event on Federal, state, and local efforts to bridge the word gap. Participants – including local leaders and non-profit, philanthropic, and academic leaders – are responding to the President’s call to action and working together to address this challenge by sharing best practices and growing the evidence base of effective interventions.

Background

What a child *hears* has direct and dramatic consequences for what a child *learns*. Children who hear fewer words have vocabularies that are half the size of their peers by age three, putting them at a disadvantage before they even step foot in a classroom.

In addition to promoting language development, talking to one’s child promotes *brain development* more broadly. Every time a parent or caregiver has a positive, engaging verbal interaction with a child – whether it is talking, singing, or reading – neural connections of all kinds are strengthened within the child’s rapidly growing brain.

That is why earlier this year, President Obama [highlighted](#) the importance of supporting learning in our youngest children to help bridge the word gap and improve their chances for later success in school and in life. The President’s message builds on the key components of his [Early Learning Initiative](#), which proposes a comprehensive plan to provide high-quality early education to children from birth to school entry.

The President’s message, along with messages from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, and Cindy McCain, was part of a bipartisan campaign to highlight the importance of bridging the word gap. This campaign was organized by Too Small to Fail, a joint initiative of the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation and Next Generation, to raise awareness of this important issue.

Bridging the word gap was also highlighted as a priority in the President’s My Brother’s Task Force [Report](#) earlier this year, as a critical step to meeting the goal of helping more young boys and men of color read at grade level by the end of third grade. The word gap effort also builds on the first-ever [White House Summit on Working Families](#), which explored innovative solutions to help expand opportunities for working families and businesses. The Summit explored a wide range of issues, including expanding access to affordable child care and early education opportunities for families.

The President’s call to action will help expand the coalition of organizations that have committed to help bridge the word gap, such as:

- [Too Small to Fail’s Talking is Teaching](#) public-action campaign aimed at educating parents about the importance of talking to one’s baby and testing out community-level approaches, including in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where Too Small to Fail is working in partnership with the George Kaiser

Family Foundation. This campaign will engage pediatricians, business owners, faith-based leaders, librarians, and others to share with parents and caregivers how simple actions (e.g., describing objects seen during a walk or bus ride, singing songs, or telling stories) can significantly improve a baby's ability to learn new words and concepts.

- Georgia's Talk with Me Baby, a statewide strategy designed to increase early exposure to language and public understanding of the primacy of language. This program provides professional development to nurses, the nation's largest healthcare workforce, who will coach new and expecting parents to deliver "language nutrition" to their kids. This collaborative effort brings together the Georgia Department of Public Health and Department of Education, Emory University's Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, and Georgia Tech.
- The City of Providence's Providence Talks, which provides members of the Providence community, where two-thirds of kindergarteners do not meet national literacy standards, with home-based caregiver coaching interventions. These interventions harness innovative technologies, including "word pedometers" that record and provide quantitative feedback to caregivers on the number of words spoken and the number of conversations they have had with their children.
- The University of Chicago, School of Medicine's Thirty Million Words Initiative, with its tiered intervention approach to optimizing caregiver-child talk at the individual, community, and population levels.

Key Activities by the Administration Being Announced Today

The Administration's Bridging the Word Gap is being launched with new initiatives from ED, HHS, and IMLS, including:

- Challenging Innovators with the "Bridging the Word Gap Incentive Prize": The Health Resources and Services Administration, an agency of HHS, is launching a new three-year challenge to innovators to develop low-cost, scalable, technology-based interventions that drive parents and caregivers to engage in more back-and-forth interactions with their young children (ages 0-4). The Incentive Prize will have three phases, with over \$300,000 in prize awards expected. The first phase will focus on the design and development of promising innovations; the second phase will support small-scale testing; and the third phase will support a regional deployment of the most promising concept.
- Launching the "Bridging the Word Gap Research Network": The Health Resources and Services Administration is signing a cooperative agreement with the University of Kansas. The agreement provides two years of funding to create a research network focused on the word gap that will: (1) develop a national research agenda; (2) build a network of researchers and research infrastructure; (3) help design interventions; and (4) disseminate information to researchers, stakeholders, and the public. The network will address the need for a more coordinated research agenda, as well as the significant need for further research on effective interventions to improve vocabulary acquisition and language development.
- Sharing best practices across the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge states: ED and HHS are announcing a new effort to support the twenty [Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge](#)

states in addressing the word gap. The RTT-ELC program supports states in building statewide systems that raise the quality of early learning and development programs and increase access to high-quality programs for children with high needs, so that all children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. A number of states are implementing strategies to improve language development for young children to bridge the word gap, and ED and HHS will increase their ability to share best practices. These states are working to promote early learning and development outcomes for children through the implementation of common statewide standards for young children, comprehensive assessments aligned to those standards across a range of domains, and clear guidelines for improving the quality of programs and services that promote health and engage families in the care and education of young children.

- The Word Gap Toolkit: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Administration for Children and Families within HHS are partnering with ED and Too Small to Fail to develop the Word Gap Toolkit, a comprehensive set of resources aimed at raising awareness about the word gap and providing tips to enrich young children’s early language environment. The suite of resources will include information for families, caregivers, and teachers applicable to all children, including those with developmental delays or disabilities and those who are dual or English language learners.
- The Institute of Museum and Library Services and Reach Out and Read are developing a partnership to highlight and expand the role of libraries and museums as literacy partners for local ROR programs. IMLS will launch a “prescription to go to the library and museum” to encourage pediatricians to work with public libraries and local museums and use regular well-baby checkups as a time to inspire families and children to use community resources to deepen family early learning experiences. Over the next year, IMLS and ROR are also planning to develop a library and museum best practices online toolkit. IMLS anticipates supporting partnerships in three states between ROR state-operation centers, museums and state library agencies, including participation from 150 libraries (50 in each of three states) and at least 75 museums (25 in each of three states).
- A new toolkit to help parents find high-quality early learning programs: Over the next eighteen months, ED’s Office of Early Learning in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education will collaborate with HHS’ Center for Disease Control and Prevention National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities and the Administration for Children and Families to develop a parent-friendly website and mobile app that will illustrate what high-quality early learning programs look like for young children birth to school-entry. The site will be a public “one-stop-shop” for information on high-quality early learning programs. The goal is to have a website and an app that provide easily accessible, user-friendly information that meets the needs of parents. HHS and ED recognize the need to and the importance of making informed choices when choosing a high-quality early learning program for their child. The Parent Toolkit will include: videos illustrating the differences between high-quality and low-quality early learning programs; information about child development, including developmental delays and disabilities, and how a child’s development should be considered in finding the right setting. In addition, the Toolkit will also offer a step-by-step set of instructions that walks parents through the process of finding high-quality programs and easy-to-understand information about quality rating and improvement systems and licensing.
- Advancing the science base for all of our youngest learners and their families: HHS and ED, in partnership with various philanthropic organizations, are co-funding a National Academies of

Science study titled: *Fostering the Development and Educational Success of Young English Language Learners and Dual Language Learners: Toward New Directions in Policy, Practice, and Research*. The study is designed to investigate the learning continuum of young English learners (ELL) and dual-language learners (DLL), explore what is known about their development, and determine how best to support their education success across diverse settings and institutions from birth through the end of high school. Evidence will be drawn from high-quality research to identify gaps in the science and make actionable policy recommendations that impact ELLs and DLLs.

###