



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community Action

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

Closing the word gap Progress has been slow, but new strategies are showing promise

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Fewer than half of children younger than 5 years old are read to daily in our country. The benefits are so compelling that encouraging reading at young children's check-ups has become an essential component of our care.

– James M. Perrin, MD

By age 4, children living in poverty hear 30 million fewer words than children in higher income households. Thirty million! That is horrendous, but it gets worse: Hearing fewer words leads to learning fewer words, which means children start kindergarten with smaller vocabularies and a so-called "word gap." Often, they can't catch up when it comes to academic readiness and long-term achievement.

– Kelly Wallace

By giving more of our kids access to high-quality preschool 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're capable of, and the life that will make us all better off.

– President Barack Obama

In April of 2015, I composed an Anti-Poverty Soldier column titled "Childhood Poverty and the Word Gap." This piece highlighted two studies from the mid-1990s: *Patterns of Childhood Poverty* by one American and two United Kingdom researchers and *The Early Catastrophe*

by a pair of child psychologists from the University of Kansas.

Betty Hart and Todd Risely, who published the latter study in 1995, identified what is today known as the "word gap," which holds that preschool age children living in poverty have heard millions of words less than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Nearly two-decades later additional research from the Stanford University Department of Psychology and the Suzanne M. Glasscock School of Continuing Studies at Rice University continue to support results from previous studies.

Bridging the "word gap" became a part of then President Barack Obama's Early Learning Initiative, which was designed to "provide high-quality early education to children from birth to school entry." Likewise, the Too Small to Fail campaign has teamed up with cities around the nation to promote "Talking is Teaching" initiatives. Among the cities participating in such activities are New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Oakland, Boston, Denver, St. Petersburg, South Bend, and the Fox Cities of Northeastern Wisconsin.

Perhaps the city that has demonstrated the most success to date through such a project is Providence, Rhode Island. After receiving a \$5 million grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies, the City of Providence initiated Providence Talks, which yielded the participation of more than 1,300 toddlers and their families over the course of four years.

According to the Brookings Institute, Providence Talks staff utilized a tool known as the “word pedometer,” which enabled them to record “all words in a child’s environment...and separate words spoken by an adult from television or other noises.” The results have been favorable and the program is currently partnering with researchers from nearby Brown University to further gauge the increase in language skills among participants.

Brookings notes that similar undertakings seeking to replicate this success in cities such as Atlanta and Hartford are now underway. Plus, the University of Chicago has recently established The Thirty Million Words Initiative, “an innovative parent-directed program designed to harness the power of parent language to build a child’s brain and impact his or her future.”

All of this is good news and provides a best practices template for other cities and school systems to follow

suit. Minneapolis has a Talking is Teaching program. St. Paul needs one too. As do Bloomington, Maplewood, Brooklyn Center, Stillwater, Rochester, Duluth, and all cities, towns, and small communities throughout Minnesota. And for that matter; we need similar initiatives in urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout the entire nation.

Our children deserve every opportunity at success that parents, teachers, administrators, and the larger society can provide them. We have fallen far too short for far too long. Let’s not drop the ball this time.

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