

Bridging the Vocabulary Gap for Academic Success

Why High-Poverty Schools Need The Illustrated Dictionary of Everyday Things

Vocabulary size is one of the strongest predictors of academic success.¹

The challenge: A Vocabulary Gap That Limits Learning

A landmark study found that by age three, children from **high-income** families have heard **30 million more words** than their peers from **low-income** backgrounds. By the time they enter kindergarten, they often have **less than half** the vocabulary size of their more affluent classmates.²

This weakness in vocabulary is a problem because students' ability to succeed in school is deeply tied to the **words they know** and **how quickly they can learn new ones**. (See Chart #1 Estimated Vocabulary Development Rates on the back.) Students with a well-developed vocabulary **learn to read more easily and quickly, read more fluently, comprehend texts more effectively, express themselves with greater precision, and acquire new knowledge more efficiently**. (See Chart 2 on the other side.)

The Solution: Filling the Vocabulary Gap for Success

The Illustrated Dictionary of Everyday Things is designed to **close this gap** by introducing children to the **foundational words** that they may not have been exposed to at home. By bridging the divide between the words students **should know to succeed** and the words they **actually do know**, this dictionary will:

- **Accelerate Learning:** When children **know more words**, they learn new words faster. Studies confirm that prior knowledge makes learning **easier** because children can **draw connections** between familiar and unfamiliar concepts.
- **Support Reading Success:** A strong vocabulary leads to **better reading fluency and comprehension**, allowing students to **understand** and **engage** with grade-level materials.
- **Level the Playing Field:** by providing students in high-poverty schools with **essential vocabulary knowledge, we ensure that** every child has the opportunity to succeed - **regardless** of socioeconomic background.

How Your Service Organization Can Help

Your organization has the opportunity to **change lives** by sponsoring *The Illustrated Dictionary of Everyday Things* for second-grade students in high-poverty schools. By ensuring that all children **have access** to the **foundational words** they need, you are giving them the **building blocks** for stronger literacy, **higher academic achievement**, and brighter **future opportunities**.

¹ (Moody et al. (2018) - *Vocabulary Instruction: A Critical analysis of Theories, Research, and Practice*).

². (Hart & Risley - *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*).

**The Illustrated Dictionary of Everyday things was created by Janet Caruthers, Ed. S. (Ed. S. - Reading; M.A. - English: B.A. - Elementary Education, Early Childhood Education, ESOL); teacher of over 34 years; Academic Intervention Specialist, Reading/Writing Specialist; with 26 years in elementary Title One schools. She started a list of words her students didn't know discovered in reading groups and class discussions in grades 1 - 5. That list became several books including The Illustrated Dictionary of Everyday Things.*

Estimated Vocabulary Development Rates

Background	Avg. Words Known at Kindergarten Entry	Avg. Words Learned per Day
Professional families	~20,000 words	~3-5 words per day
Working-class families	~12,000 words	~2-4 words per day
Welfare families	~5,000 words	~1-2 words per day

These figures reflect how children with **larger vocabularies at school entry tend to acquire new words faster**, reinforcing the importance of early language exposure. The richer a child's vocabulary base, the more effectively they can **recognize patterns, infer meanings, and absorb new words** in classroom settings.

3rd Grade Test Scores and Demographics for selected schools in Hillsborough County, Florida

This chart indicates that the % of students living in poverty directly correlates with the % of students reading on or above grade level.

School	% of students from economically disadvantaged homes	% of students reading on grade level or above	% of students reading BELOW grade level
WIMAUMA	95	20	80
REDDICK	92	24	76
RUSKIN	91	28	72
THOMPSON	84	44	56
GIBSONTON	96	41	59
CYPRESS CREEK	82	46	54
CORR	76	59	41
RIVERVIEW	68	59	41
SUMMERFIELD	67	55	45
SESSUMS	57	56	44
DOBY	45	74	26
COLLINS	40	70	30
APOLLO BEACH	35	74	26
FISHHAWK CREEK	14	89	11
BEVIS	12	90	10

At Bevis Elementary only 12% of students are living in poverty, and their reading scores are great, with 90% of their students reading on/above grade level. In contrast, 91% of students attending Ruskin Elementary are living in poverty with only 28% reading on/above grade level.

Generally speaking, children brought up in homes at the poverty level or below enter school with weaker vocabularies because they have heard fewer words, they have not been read to regularly, and they have not engaged in quality conversations with their family. This creates an ever widening gap in reading achievement levels between those students with strong vocabularies and those with weak vocabularies. This can be explained by the fact that one must understand 95% of the words in a text to comprehend it. The only way to counteract this, is to focus on teaching the **FOUNDATIONAL** words children should have learned at home through incidental conversation and regular book-sharing sessions. These are the words included in The Illustrated Dictionary of Everyday Things.