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Leveling the Playing Field for All Children: Federal, State, and Local Efforts to Bridge the Word Gap Subscribe

Posted by [Maya Shankar](#) on October 16, 2014 at 08:49 AM EDT

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 few 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, 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.

The Administration will be 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, caregivers, and teachers on this critical issue (to see the Fact Sheet in full, click [here](#)):

- 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.

In addition to these Federal announcements, we are seeing multi-sector leadership to address this challenge. Today the State of Georgia is announcing efforts to further develop a state-level coalition that strives to bring language nutrition to every child in Georgia. Talk With Me Baby empowers parents and caregivers with the knowledge and resources they need to provide early language exposure to babies. By integrating language nutrition coaching as a core competency across large-scale workforces of nurses, WIC nutritionists, and early education professionals,

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Georgia hopes to systematically strengthen and reinforce the capacity of all parents and caregivers to deliver vital language nutrition to children starting at birth.

Too Small to Fail (TSTF) is announcing plans to convene state, city, and local leaders to share ideas; provide capacity-building webinars on how to develop and bolster local word gap campaigns; and, provide a road map and strategic resources to support local efforts to tackle the word gap. Additionally, they will share information, based on lessons learned from its pilot cities in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Oakland, California, on communications, parent education, community partnerships, implementation and evaluation for other interested localities.

We hope to build on this momentum and see even more follow-on work in the months and years to come. If you're interested in learning more about the day's events or joining this effort, please email us at wordgap@ostp.gov.

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