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LOCAL

Students' vocabularies shown tied to incomes Research finds poor children often know fewer words

By Eileen FitzGerald
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Children from low-income families often enter first grade with a 3,000-word vocabulary. Their peers from middle-income families know 5,000 words, and those from wealthy homes know up to 10,000 words.

For educators trying to understand why some urban students in Connecticut and elsewhere tend to trail more upscale classmates on standardized tests, this recent research holds some clues.

In a nutshell, low-income students start out knowing less than their peers and never catch up. "This is why closing the achievement gap (between rich and poor) is such a profound challenge," said Danbury Assistant Superintendent William Glass.

The topics of students, vocabulary and test scores came up at a recent meeting of the Danbury Board of Education, as educators and school board members discussed the scores of the city's 10th-graders on the Connecticut Academic Performance Test.

The research that Glass cited was culled from a number of studies and summarized in a report by a group called the National Urban Alliance. It is important to educators in Connecticut, who for years have been frustrated that

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most students from inner cities score lower than their suburban counterparts on standardized tests given to children in fourth, sixth, eighth and 10th grade.

Eric Cooper, the National Urban Alliance's executive director, said he is not surprised by the research. He and others say children from low-income families have a far narrower range of life experiences than do affluent children.

In other words, most poorer children don't visit space museums or the Statue of Liberty; they don't go on vacations in the mountains or at the beach, they don't take tennis or piano lessons.

And it's those types of experiences that help build vocabulary.

"How can one compare a child who has taken many trips, (and who has been) read to every night, provided a tutor, taken to the library, or has worked extensively with a computer with a child whose family's circumstances deny this opportunity?" Cooper said.

Imagine, said Danbury's Glass, a low-income child who grows up in an apartment or housing complex. Then ask that child, on a test or a school assignment, to write a story based on going to an attic and explaining what he finds when he opens a trunk. The child has never heard of an attic or a trunk. He can't get past the meaning of the words to complete the test question or classroom assignment.

But it goes beyond youngsters not knowing words such as "attic." By themselves, the lack of life experiences and gaps in real-world knowledge can inhibit learning.

"The theory that all new learning is based on prior knowledge, combined with the fact that kids from lower economic means don't have the same vocabulary, has profound implications," said Glass.

However, the research is encouraging in some ways.

It indicates the vocabulary problems of poor children aren't a matter of intelligence. It also shows that an academic achievement gap is not a given, that parents and educators can help offset a low-income child's lack of experiences by constantly reading to him or her.

"There is nothing inherently flawed about the children or the parents," Glass said. "We have a gap in the country, but by working closely with parents and with educators about their expectations for the children, we feel we can improve."

Research shows other steps can be taken to help level the playing field. Children need 3,000 to 4,000 hours of preschool to have the best chance to succeed in elementary school and beyond. Now, many urban students get just a tenth of that, if they have access to preschool at all.

Regular schools can also help bridge the experience gap.

Cooper recommends that schools take children on field trips to increase their real-world experiences. He also said schools should get children involved in projects in which they use basic reading, writing and speaking skills while learning about a real-world subject, such as homelessness.

He would put more emphasis on summer school, because low-income students often lose their academic gains in the summer. In contrast, wealthier students often add to their world experiences with vacations or camping trips.

Cooper, who communicated with The News-Times via e-mail, also said further

research into how the brain works will help educators come up with new ways to close the achievement gap.

Danbury schools are already taking steps in light of the research that revealed lagging vocabularies.

The school system is putting reading libraries in all first-grade classrooms, Glass said, because all families can't afford books. The district also has made reading comprehension part of all subject areas, instead of isolating it in reading lessons.

And Danbury school officials are working with parents to get them to understand how they can help their children learn more words.

"That is the reason that people say the single most important thing you can do for your children is to read to them. It helps them develop vocabulary," Glass said. "Even poor children, even if they can't go to visit a space center, they can read about it."

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