



**Embargoed: Hold for Release Until  
Thursday, December 6, 2012, at 11 a.m. (EST)**

**STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:  
*Vocabulary Results from the 2009 and 2011 NAEP Reading Assessments***

**BRENT HOUSTON**

**Principal, Shawnee (Okla.) Middle School, and  
Member, National Assessment Governing Board**

Today's special report puts an important spotlight on something that's not discussed nearly enough on its own: vocabulary. We discuss concepts such as reading comprehension and reading on grade level, but we can't have success in those areas if our students also do not learn to understand the meaning of words in a variety of contexts. I appreciate that the Governing Board had the foresight to develop a framework requiring vocabulary results to be reported separately for the new generation of NAEP reading assessments.

I am a middle-school principal, but my first job in that role was at another school, pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, in the same Oklahoma district. At that time, my students took the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills in various subjects. Consistently, many of our students across various grade levels scored rather low when it came to vocabulary. After awhile, we developed specific lessons in language arts and reading that focused on vocabulary and multiple meanings of words. So in classroom lessons, for example, teachers would explain that the word "bat" in various situations could be a flying mammal, an important piece of baseball equipment, or something you do with your eyelashes. The key idea was progressing from learning words in isolation to understanding words in context.

Later, as an elementary school principal, I was fortunate enough to have two full-time Title I reading specialists. I deployed them in a manner that allowed us to break classes into groups of four to six students. With the two reading specialists in the room, plus the classroom teacher and a paraprofessional, we were able to dramatically reduce the pupil-teacher ratio. We focused on developing skills that we had diagnosed as needing improvement in order for students to read on grade level. This system worked tremendously for us, as we were able to see growth in the skills of every group of students as we tracked them, from the pretest given in August through the first benchmark in December and the final post-test after the 32nd week of school. In addition to the

use of the reading specialists, our school focused on developing the academic vocabulary for each grade.

We still focus on those strategies at Shawnee Middle School, although we do not have the personnel for small breakout groups. However, we do attempt to make deliberate efforts to increase students' knowledge and mastery of word meaning and academic vocabulary, which involves a particular bank of words for certain subjects. For example, in mathematics, we make sure our students know the meaning of terms like "quotient" and "sum," so that test questions or homework exercises that use these terms don't become stumbling blocks to students' understanding of important math concepts.

Today's results from the NAEP vocabulary report make it clear that good reading performance is connected to good vocabulary skills. In 2011, fourth- and eighth-grade students performing above the 75th percentile in reading comprehension also had the highest average vocabulary scores. Conversely, lower-performing students at or below the 25th percentile had the lowest average vocabulary scores. We see similar findings for grade 12 in 2009.

But perhaps what struck me most—and what hits closest to home—is observing the performance trends by family income. About 80 percent of the 816 students at my middle school are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. The performance gaps are significant between students who are eligible for the lunch program and students who are not. In fourth grade, for example, the gap in scores by lunch eligibility was 31 points. In grade 8, the gap in scores by lunch eligibility was 28 points.

I can also look at this anecdotally. Among my students who are economically disadvantaged, I see some common barriers: not having reading materials at home, not having a support group to encourage visits to the library or reading newspapers and magazines, or simply not being read to. The experience of being able to do more, and see more, makes a difference.

At Shawnee Middle School, we're cognizant of these disadvantages, and we try to organize lessons in reading and language arts to encourage better vocabulary skills. For example, teachers routinely stop when reading passages aloud to ask questions and hold conversations. This encourages students to listen for clues to define and understand words they don't know. Also, when we have two words that sound alike but have very different meanings—such as "succeed" and "secede"—we isolate each word and pair it with a related word to help students learn the distinction. So when we talk about "succeed," we discuss the term "successful" to further highlight the difference.

These NAEP results have made me realize that to improve vocabulary performance, and thus overall reading performance, schools nationwide really need to go beyond teaching word definitions. I had mentioned earlier about working on academic vocabulary, which is an overall goal of my school district. It's an important skill. However, I want to explore additional strategies and spend even more time teaching contextual clues, multiple meanings, antonyms, and synonyms. The NAEP vocabulary assessment, for example, targets words that are used across content areas. This hopefully will make us really focus on the skills students need for increased vocabulary knowledge.

Additionally, we need to look at how we teach reading in general. We progress from decoding skills and breaking down words into pieces during the first several years of elementary school to a study of literature, including areas such as plot development and character traits. Literature is important, but it must be accompanied by instruction in skills such as vocabulary, which we should continue emphasizing throughout the higher grades.

When I gave spelling tests as a teacher many years ago, I would define the word, not just announce it to my class. My goal was to emphasize understanding word meaning and spelling at the same time. What good is knowing how to spell a word if you cannot use it in the proper context? Learning word meaning and improving reading comprehension cannot happen solely through the isolation of skills or only in a reading class.

My experience has been that deliberately embedding word analysis and vocabulary skills in all areas of the curriculum will lead to higher levels of reading comprehension for students. It really is so much more than just words on a page.