

Academic Language Intervention Study

As part of a national study funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, MDRC, a non-profit and non-partisan social policy research organization, and its partners, Abt Associates and the Florida Center for Reading Research will study the implementation and impact of Word Generation Elementary in school districts across the country. Word Generation Elementary is an academic language program developed by the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) together with some of the nation’s leading literacy experts. The program focuses on improving students’ academic language and reading comprehension skills, and this project will study its impact on both English Learners (ELs) and disadvantaged non-EL students in 4th and 5th grade mainstream classrooms. Selected for this study through a competitive process, Word Generation Elementary has demonstrated research evidence of improving student outcomes, and its developers have experience supporting the implementation of Word Generation in districts across the country. The program will be implemented in participating districts in the 2017-18 school year, with schools receiving training and support beginning in summer 2017.

What is “academic language” and why is it important?

Academic language refers to language that is prevalent in academic discourse across school content areas, but is infrequent in everyday conversations. While ELs and disadvantaged non-EL students may have sufficient skills to engage in everyday conversation, many struggle with this more formal academic language typically used in school. In recent years, educators have linked lack of proficiency in academic language to students’ literacy struggles and have hypothesized that academic language skills contribute to reading comprehension and success in core content area classes.

What is the focus of the program?

Word Generation Elementary includes 12 two-week teaching units that introduce 5-6 high-frequency academic vocabulary words that are used across disciplines. Each unit begins with a video newscast and a “Reader’s Theater” that introduces multiple perspectives on topic that is designed to be interesting to 4th and 5th graders – for example, “What is fair?” and “Who should decide what we eat?” Each unit provides students with repeated, authentic opportunities to actively engage in using that academic language in the classroom by reading a variety of texts, participating in word-learning activities and writing tasks, and discussing and debating about each topic using the focus words. Examples of focus words related to the “Who should decide what we eat?” topic, for example, include: *nutrition*, *effective*, *campaign*, *respect*, and *eliminate*.

Word Generation Elementary instruction can be conducted as part of different subject blocks, with many of the units designed to address learning goals in ELA and other subjects. This provides teachers with a continuous theme across different con-



tent areas, which reduces the instructional burden of making things relevant across different subjects.

SERP will collaborate with districts to support the implementation of the classroom-based Word Generation Elementary activities, including training a locally-based coach to provide ongoing in-school and other supports to teachers.

What will the study involve?

The research team will study the impact and implementation of Word Generation Elementary in up to 12 school districts interested in supporting the academic language development of 4th and 5th grade students in their districts. To measure the impact of the program, this study will use a randomized controlled trial design—a lottery-like process—in which some schools will be selected to implement the program and the other schools, which serve as comparison schools, continue implementing their usual instruction. As part of this research study, MDRC will work with participating districts to collect data in accordance with district policies and to minimize the burden on teachers and students, to the extent possible.

What is the timeline for this study?

- Schools will be selected to implement Word Generation Elementary or serve as comparison schools after study participation agreements with the district are completed in summer 2017.
- Coach and teacher trainings will begin in the late summer of 2017.
- Participating schools will implement the program during the 2017-18 school year, during which teachers will receive ongoing training and support from the program developers and the local coach.
- The study team will collect data during the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years.

What are the data collection activities?

The three main school-based research activities, in which both schools that receive the program and the comparison schools will participate, include:

- **Teacher surveys** to gather information about teachers' experiences and their classrooms. Surveys will be administered in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years.
- **Classroom visits** to help the study team learn about how implementation is going across participating classrooms and how Word Generation Elementary instruction compares with other techniques. These brief visits will occur in the fall and spring of the 2017-18 school year.
- **Student assessments** to help the study team learn about students' academic language and reading comprehension skills. Assessments will be administered by the project team in the 2017-18 school year.

Finally, the study team will work with each school to collect basic information about 4th and 5th grade students and teachers and work with the district data office to collect existing student records data in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years.