

**APS Word Study Research Project**  
**Executive Summary, 2008-2009**  
Michelle Picard, Early Childhood, Supervisor  
Mary Zolman, Language Arts, Supervisor

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Overview of the Elementary English Language Arts Word Study Initiative

Arlington Public Schools adopted a customized developmental spelling program, *Words Their Way In Action*, in May 2007, to promote effective instruction in the development of written word knowledge. This adoption was in response not only to national research, but also to local assessment. The APS English Language Arts program evaluation (2006) suggested that word study lessons declined in frequency and quality across the elementary grades that were observed. Kindergarten and grade one classrooms earned the highest ratings of acceptable or exemplary (71%) of the time. Acceptable or exemplary ratings declined to 57% and 55% respectively in grades two and four. Reading teachers were the only subgroup which achieved a rating of acceptable or exemplary at a rate of 90%. Recommendations from the program evaluation were made to direct programmatic and professional development toward improving instruction in this area.

After the adoption of the *Arlington Words Their Way in Action*, elementary schools were provided with common core programmatic materials which included: teacher resource guides, developmental student sort books, a common qualitative spelling assessment, and for primary grades poetry charts and in grade one leveled libraries. In addition, a slate of professional development was designed and implemented. Elementary teachers were invited to participate in summer workshop rotations during June 2007 that addressed the reading, word study, writing, and handwriting programs. Ten half-day workshop sessions were made available to introduce word study; specifically, the weekly routines and instructional techniques were addressed. Additionally, the ELA lead teachers, Title I reading teachers, and Special Education lead teachers engaged in a workshop designed to administer and score the developmental spelling inventory used to form instructional groups. Reading teachers were responsible for turn-around-assessment training at each elementary school.

Most of the professional development initiatives were voluntary and included: county-wide workshops, a district-sponsored graduate class, summer workshop sessions, and several schools engaged in site-based development. The site-based initiatives included three two-hour workshops with a three-hour initial workshop in August focused on word study practices and the relationship of word study to reading, writing, and vocabulary development. Other schools facilitated faculty meetings devoted to word study practices or provided a study group within the school. Also, assessment meetings were routinely held 2-4 times a year in which a reading teacher or the Early Childhood Supervisor would meet with grade level teams to examine student assessment and monitor progress. Professional development varied in length and intensity to meet the diverse needs of our teaching staff.

In addition to workshops and graduate classes, the Office of Early Childhood, published and distributed electronic word study tips for teachers in an effort to sustain the instructional conversation within the schools. Reading teachers were encouraged to talk-up the tips with teachers in faculty or grade level meetings. Instructional video segments were also produced using Arlington teachers and students to showcase specific instructional techniques. These video

segments are available to all teachers. Again, reading teachers have been encouraged to showcase the films in professional development, faculty, and grade level settings.

### **Evaluation Design**

The results reported in this evaluation are based on data collected from observations and surveys:

- One hundred and fifty one observations across the (K-5) elementary grades in each of the 22 elementary schools were conducted
- Three hundred and nine surveys were distributed to teachers responsible for implementing word study; 144 teachers participated.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

#### Observations

- *Finding 1: Observational data: Instructional lessons:* Observational data suggest that Arlington Public Schools has engaged elementary teachers in **moderate** to **high** levels of implementation in first 12-18 months of implementation; there was little to no variation across the elementary grades. Ninety-six (96) observations were rated at or above a composite score of 17; Forty-four (44) earned moderate ratings and 8 low implementation ratings.
- *Finding 2: Observational data: Relative strengths and challenges within instruction:* Within the lesson components APS teachers are routinely using differentiated sorts and are teaching in small groups, while fewer teachers focus on the underlying generalization presented in the sort or address vocabulary within the teacher-led lesson.

#### Professional Development and perceptions of teacher and student knowledge

- *Finding 3: Teachers' perceptions of their own knowledge:* The majority of teachers indicated that they were well prepared to teach both the content and process of word study. Teachers reported more confidence with the instructional techniques or process of teaching word study compared to the underlying generalizations or content. Seventy-four percent of respondents reported that they were very familiar or confident with the process compared to 67% with content.
- *Finding 4: Teachers perceptions of student progress:* The majority of teachers (91%) indicated that their students' achievement in spelling ranged from "Average" to "Excellent"; specifically, teachers noted the following: Excellent (5%); Above Average (38%), "Average" (48%); Below Average 5%; None 4%.
- *Finding 5: Professional development:* The majority of teachers (81%) participated in some form of district-sponsored professional development including county-wide and site based workshops, a graduate course, or a summer session.

## Word study instructional routines and methods

- *Finding 6: Forming instructional groups:* Teachers are forming instructional groups based on the results of the Developmental Spelling Assessment (97%) and through collaboration with colleagues (56%). Some teachers also consider the weekly spelling assessment and unedited writing samples when forming groups. The majority of teachers report forming 3-4 instructional groups. Ten percent (10%) form one instructional group; two groups (21%); three groups (36%); and four (33%) instructional groups.
- *Finding 7: Pacing:* The majority of teachers (80%) reported that they use on-going assessment to pace lessons that include skipping specific sorts and providing supplemental sorts; while twenty-percent (20%) of teachers report following the scope and sequence of the student books without deviation.
- *Finding 8: Word study instructional techniques:* Teachers are using various word study techniques to teach and reinforce spelling including word and picture sorts (86%), word hunts (69%), writing sorts (68%), speed sorts (59%), and written reflections (29%).
- *Finding 9: Integration of word study with reading and writing:* More teachers consistently integrate word study with writing (28%) than reading (15%), while the majority of teachers report integrating these proficiencies “Sometimes.” More respondents “Always” integrate writing and word study (28%) compared to reading (15%).
- *Finding 10: Length of an average word study lesson:* Significant differences existed across the elementary grades in two areas: the length of an average word study lesson and the number of lessons taught in a week. The average word study lesson in the district is less than 15 minutes (58%); while 38% of the respondents reported lessons in the 16-20 minute range and 4% lessons 21 or more minutes. There was considerable variance across the elementary grades in this category. Fifth grade tended to have longer lessons.
- *Finding 11: Number of teacher-led word study lessons:* The majority of teachers are teaching each word study group 3-5 times per week (47%), while 31% are teaching twice a week and 22% are teaching once a week. There was considerable variance across the elementary grades in this category. Fifth grade varied from teaching once a week to five times a week.
- *Finding 12: Accessing word and picture sorts:* The majority of teachers access sorts from the custom published student books (95%), while high percentages also access sorts from district-created sorts on Blackboard (48%), professional books (38%) and teacher created sorts (39%). Additionally, 25% of respondents use the SMARTboard sorts.
- *Finding 13: Personnel Support:* The majority of teachers reported consulting with a reading teacher (78%) and/or colleague (70%) to support instruction in word study.

## Factors which inhibit and promote effective implementation

- *Finding 14: Factors which inhibit effective implementation of word study:* Teachers are challenged by differentiation and the effective use of time. These themes emerged from the open-ended comments as well as multiple choice data; 83% of surveyed teachers identified lack of time; 43% identified difficulty integrating word study with curricular materials; 19% identified lack of access to materials as factors which inhibit effective implementation.
- *Finding 15: Factors which promote effective implementation of word study:* Teachers identified three themes that promote effective implementation: collaboration among professionals, value of professional development, and access to common teacher materials and resources.
  - *Collaboration among professionals:* Teachers noted that a collaborative culture supported their instruction. Teachers referred to reading teachers, colleagues, the ELA office and Early Childhood Supervisor as sources of support. Additionally, teachers recognized the use of personnel including reading specialists, ESOL/HILT teachers, and instructional assistants to work with differentiated small groups as a positive factor promoting effective implementation.
  - *Value of professional development:* Teachers also identified the value of professional development frequently through the multiple choice and open-ended comments as another factor promoting effective implementation of word study. The district-sponsored graduate class was frequently cited as beneficial.
  - *Access to common teacher materials and resources:* Teachers identified common materials as a factor which promoted implementation. Specifically, 83% of surveyed teachers noted the use of published sorts and 77% noted the use of the teacher resource guide as useful common materials that promote implementation. Word study tips for teachers (63%) and instructional video segments (8%) were also referenced. Once teacher wrote, “I have everything I need to teach word study.”

## Recommendations

1. Build capacity at each school with resident experts and encourage collaboration among professional colleagues
2. Continue to design, coordinate, and facilitate professional development for elementary teachers who are responsible for teaching word study. Consider the following aspects of development:
  - Provide opportunities that vary in length and intensity
  - Differentiate opportunities for novice and veteran word study practitioners

- Emphasize both the process of teaching word study and the content or underlying generalizations within each lesson
  - Focus on effective time management; lessons in 15 minutes or less
  - Focus on the use of reflection - written and oral
  - Focus on the development of vocabulary – specific and generative
  - Focus on the integration of word study lesson with reading and writing
  - Focus on pacing and monitoring student progress
3. Continue to sustain the instructional conversation through the use of reading personnel, word study tips for teachers, instructional video segments, and common materials
  4. Examine student assessment data and monitor progress by individual students, classroom, and grade level growth over time
  5. Share data from the word study research project with teachers and parents to increase support and understanding of the word study initiative