

# THE ROLE OF DICTIONARIES IN ADVANCING LITERACY

(November 2022) The Policy Foundation sponsored a public forum on the issue of dictionaries and literacy on Nov. 4 at Lyon College in Batesville. The forum featured a keynote talk by Lyon Assistant Professor of Elementary Education Dr. Karin Brown (1); a Batesville School District literacy specialist and 3rd Grade school teachers; parents; and business community members.

## Policy Foundation Role

The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1995. In 2005, the Foundation launched a community service program, Dictionaries to the Delta in Phillips County. The program was expanded to Pulaski County and has distributed more than 1,000 free dictionaries to 3rd Grade students. The Foundation works with The Dictionary Project, a South Carolina nonprofit that has distributed more than 35 million dictionaries nationwide since 1995.(2)

## Dr. Brown: The Importance of Print Dictionaries

Dr. Brown explained that students learn word references, synonyms and antonyms from print dictionaries. They notice new words while searching dictionaries, learn alphabetical order and develop research independence as students. From dictionaries, students learn the meaning, spelling, usage and origin of words.

## Scholastic.com

Dr. Brown cited a July 2022 *Scholastic.com* article that examines five unsung literacy benefits of using a print dictionary.

- Your child will experience a snowball effect of seeing new words.
- Your child's brain will get a workout and develop problem-solving skills.
- Print dictionaries slow the process and provide students with a small break.
- Your child will be more focused and fully engaged.
- Print dictionaries fuel curiosity because words capture attention randomness.

## Technology

Dr. Brown noted many schools have access to technology including online dictionaries but coverage is not universal in the state. "In rural Arkansas," she explained, "one can travel 30 to 35 miles from here, maybe even closer and discover one doesn't have reliable internet." A student with a print dictionary can still learn new words.

## The Importance of 3rd Grade

Dictionary Project Director Mary French explained in a communication (4) that 3rd Grade students "are important to this process because at the age of eight or nine they are learning to read and reading to learn. They need to learn new words independently by searching for them not asking Siri or Googling the

spelling or meaning of a word in order to develop curiosity in a safe and vetted environment because what they learn at this time is imprinted in their minds."

French said it is important for 3rd Graders "to learn what is right and what is wrong in order to do things properly because everything is connected and what is not correct and accurate cannot support advanced learning and understanding." Arkansas foundations have also focused on 3rd Graders.

A Batesville School District literacy specialist told the forum students "need to learn 2,000 to 3,000 words per school year." A print dictionary "supplements classroom instruction." She said "the dictionary speaks to a lot of the moving parts we're doing in the classroom."

### **Literacy**

Dr. Brown said dictionaries play a key role advancing literacy. Ms. French explained, "Dictionaries are important to literacy because they help children and adults understand our language so that they can use it effectively and expand their vocabulary to be able to connect with more people by understanding what they say."

Independence County is one of a handful of Arkansas counties with 100% student print dictionary coverage because of Rotary. The Batesville Rotary Club distributed more than 400 dictionaries to 3rd Grade students last year, an accomplishment noted by the Policy Foundation. A Rotary representative said, "To see the smiles on their faces ... that's the best."

-- Greg Kaza

### **Discussion Question: Is 100% statewide coverage feasible in Arkansas?**

### **References**

- (1) <https://www.lyon.edu/karinbrown>
- (2) [www.dictionaryproject.org](http://www.dictionaryproject.org)
- (3) "5 Benefits of a Print Dictionary" (scholastic.com)
- (4) Dictionary Project to Policy Foundation, Oct. 28, 2022 communication.