PBS KIDS’ Series *Martha Speaks* Shows Impressive Impact in Helping Children Learn New Vocabulary Across On-Air and Mobile Platforms

BOSTON (May 31, 2011) — Three independent studies report that the highly rated PBS KIDS series *Martha Speaks* is an effective tool across platforms (broadcast and mobile devices) in increasing young children’s vocabulary. The studies noted increases comparable to traditional classroom vocabulary instruction (such as reading out loud) for kids who viewed multiple episodes of the show, as well as gains of up to 31 percent in the vocabulary tested among low-income children who played with the *Martha Speaks* Dog Party iPhone app.

“We’re thrilled with the impressive impact the project is having on increasing young children’s vocabulary,” says Carol Greenwald, WGBH senior executive producer. “Vocabulary is critical to reading comprehension and a key predictor of reading success. By the time children enter kindergarten, however, a great chasm in vocabulary knowledge exists between disadvantaged kids and their peers—and the former never catch up. Across multiple platforms, *Martha Speaks* has been able to enhance kids’ knowledge of words through the context of a talking dog and great stories.”

Each episode of *Martha Speaks* targets 20 new vocabulary words. Some words are taught implicitly through the context in which they are used. Other words are explicitly defined. The words range in difficulty from those typically taught between 2nd and 8th grade. Targeted words are repeated multiple times per episode.

The first study, funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and part of the recently published CPB report “Findings From Ready To Learn 2005-2010,” demonstrates that *Martha Speaks* helps kids increase their vocabulary. On average, low-income children who watched *Martha Speaks* had a significantly greater increase in vocabulary knowledge compared to children who did not watch the show. Additionally, the study demonstrates that *Martha Speaks* is an effective tool in helping to bridge the vocabulary gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers.

“High-quality educational television, such as *Martha Speaks*, has the potential to facilitate language opportunities in the home by offering an inexpensive means of introducing young children to key early language and literacy experiences,” says Deborah Linebarger, Ph.D., Lead Investigator in the study and Director of the Children’s Media Lab at the University of Pennsylvania.

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1 The report focuses on Ready To Learn-supported television programs, including “SUPER WHY!,” “Martha Speaks” and “The Electric Company”; interactive games; classroom materials; teaching and learning tools; and community engagement activities.
Other key findings of the *Martha Speaks / CPB Ready To Learn* study include:

- Both urban and rural children who watched *Martha Speaks* significantly outperformed their urban and rural non-viewing peers in providing more detailed and accurate definitions of vocabulary words targeted by the show.

- Children were able to retain the increased vocabulary, and showed even greater gains on targeted words weeks after the study ended.

- All urban children who viewed *Martha Speaks* were better able to define more words than their non-viewing urban peers regardless of both the difficulty of the words as measured by the grade level in which they are usually learned, and the number of times the words were used in the show.

- Program-specific vocabulary knowledge translated into higher standardized vocabulary scores for urban boys and rural children living in low socioeconomic-status homes, indicating that the skills taught in the show transfer to more generalized vocabulary learning.

- As an early-intervention tool targeting vocabulary knowledge, *Martha Speaks* provides strong support for word learning and results in significantly higher vocabulary scores compared to educational television programs that do not focus on vocabulary learning.

Additional Research Studies

Two additional research studies further reinforce the success of *Martha Speaks* as a vocabulary-teaching tool:

- A Rockman *et al* study which was included in the Joan Ganz Cooney Center Report, *Learning: is there an app for that?*, evaluated the learning outcomes related to the *Martha Speaks* Dog Party app for iPhone and iPod Touch, and found that 3- to 7-year-old children who played with the app experienced gains of up to 31% for the vocabulary included in the app.

- A University of Maryland study that compared watching a *Martha Speaks* episode to a teacher reading the same story out loud (a traditional method for teaching vocabulary) found that watching a *Martha Speaks* episode is as effective as hearing the story in increasing vocabulary.

- Additionally, The University of Maryland study found that children who watched repeat viewings of the same episode experienced higher vocabulary gains.

Together, the results highlight the impressive impact *Martha Speaks* is having on young children’s vocabulary development. *Martha Speaks* has proven to be an effective and powerful television project that has served low-income families throughout the US as an inexpensive means of introducing young children to key early-language and literacy experiences. On average, *Martha Speaks* reaches 4.7 million viewers on air each week and 800,000 visitors and 2.5 million visits online per month. According to Nielsen Media Research, *Martha Speaks* continues to exceed the average household audience numbers for
low-income populations. Hispanic households comprise 11% of US households, but 20% of the series’ audience. Black households comprise 12% of the US population, but 16% of the series’ audience.

*Martha Speaks* was created as part of PBS KIDS Raising Readers, a national initiative that uses the power of public media to build the reading skills of children ages 2 to 8, with an emphasis on children from low-income families. The effort was funded by a Ready To Learn grant from the U.S. Department of Education, part of a cooperative agreement with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and PBS. *Martha Speaks* is a production of WGBH Boston and DHX Media. Corporate funding is provided by Chuck E. Cheese’s®, Kiddie Academy® Child Care Learning Centers, and Chick-fil-A, Inc. Additional funding provided by public television viewers.

**Read the summative evaluation:**

**About Martha Speaks**

A co-production from WGBH Boston and DHX Media, *Martha Speaks* is based on the best-selling books by Susan Meddaugh, which have sold nearly one million copies in the U.S. and been widely translated throughout the world. The series follows the adventures of Martha, a loveable dog whose appetite for alphabet soup gives her the power of human speech. Using her speaking abilities, Martha gets jobs, foils bad guys, wins contests, runs for office and orders lots of pizza!

The underlying goal of *Martha Speaks* is to help increase children’s oral vocabulary — and how better to get kids excited about learning new words than with a dog who just can’t stop talking? Throughout the series, Martha teaches young children vocabulary words like *imaginative*, *splurge*, *experiment*, and more. Martha’s antics also continue online at **PBSKIDS.org/martha**, a comprehensive website that builds on the series’ curriculum to bolster the oral vocabulary of 4- to 7-year-olds.

Distributed internationally by DHX Media, *Martha Speaks* also airs on TVO, Knowledge Network, and SCN and has been acquired by broadcasters across Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

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About CPB

CPB is a private, nonprofit corporation created by Congress in 1967 and is steward of the federal government’s investment in public broadcasting. It helps support the operation of nearly 1,300 locally-owned and operated public television and radio stations nationwide, and is the largest single source of funding for research, technology, and program development for public radio, television and related online services.

About WGBH Boston

WGBH Boston is America’s preeminent public broadcasting producer, the source of one-third of PBS’s prime-time lineup along with some of public television’s best-known lifestyle shows, many public radio favorites, and a roster of children’s programs that empower kids with innovative, entertaining, curriculum-based content. Among the WGBH-produced children’s titles: Arthur, Curious George, Postcards from Buster, Between the Lions, Design Squad Nation, Martha Speaks and Fetch! with Ruff Ruffman. WGBH is the number-one producer of websites on pbs.org, one of the most trafficked dot-org websites in the world, and a pioneer in educational multimedia and in technologies and services that make media accessible to the 36 million Americans who rely on captioning or video descriptions. WGBH has been recognized with hundreds of honors: Emmys, Peabodys, DuPont-Columbia Awards … even two Oscars. In 2002, WGBH received a special institutional Peabody Award for 50 years of excellence. For more information, go to www.wgbh.org.

About DHX Media Ltd.

DHX Media Ltd. is a leading international producer and distributor of television programming and interactive content with an emphasis on children, family and youth markets. DHX Media Ltd. shares are listed on the TSX, the Toronto Stock Exchange. DHX Media has offices in Toronto, Halifax, Vancouver and Los Angeles and has a growing library of over 2,300 half-hours of mostly children’s and youth-oriented properties from own and third party producers. Live action series include That’s So Weird and How to Be Indie alongside animated series such as Animal Mechanicals, Franny’s Feet, Kid vs Kat, dirtgirlworld, and new preschool show Rastamouse. www.dhxmedia.com

About PBS KIDS

PBS KIDS, the number one educational media brand for children, offers all children the opportunity to explore new ideas and new worlds through television, online and community-based programs. Each quarter, more than 27 million children watch PBS KIDS on TV, and PBSKIDS.org, the number one kids’ entertainment site for free video streaming, attracts more than 9.5 million unique visitors per month (Nielsen, NTI Q42010; comScore Video Metrix; Google Analytics). For more information on specific PBS KIDS programs supporting literacy, science, math and more, visit PBS.org/pressroom, or follow PBS KIDS on Twitter and Facebook.
About Ready To Learn Television (U.S. Department of Education)

Ready To Learn Television is a grant program managed by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and Improvement. It supports the development of innovative educational television and digital media targeted at preschool and early elementary school children and their families. Its general goal is to promote early learning and school readiness, with a particular interest in reaching low-income children. In addition to creating television and other media products, the program supports activities intended to promote national distribution of the programming, effective educational uses of the programming, community-based outreach, and research on educational effectiveness.

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