



PRINCE ALBERT
ROMAN CATHOLIC Est. 1887
SEPARATE SCHOOL DIVISION No.6

Learning for life through Catholic Education

Talking Partners

An Oral Language Targeted Intervention to Support Students Learning English as an Additional Language Not Reading at Grade Level

Nominated by: Prince Albert Roman Catholic School Division for the
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Board Chair: Suzanne Stubbs

Director of Education: Lorel Trumier



Talking Partners:

An Oral Language Targeted Intervention to Support Students Learning English as an Additional Language Not Reading at Grade Level

Abstract:

“An essential foundation for the development of reading and writing abilities is that of strong oral language capabilities” (Early Literacy: A Resource for Teachers, 2000.)

Some students coming to school have not yet fully acquired the language of instruction – English. Some of these students may speak no English, instead speaking an Indigenous language or another language as their mother tongue. These students require an ‘oral language boost’ in order to fully engage in the learning opportunities provided at school in order to develop the necessary skill set required for reading. You can’t read what you can’t say. You can’t write what you can’t say.

Talking Partners is a 10-week oral language intervention based on sound literacy practices that support students in building their oral language and in turn reading. On average, in a 10-week period of intervention, students show 1.5 years growth in vocabulary development, 1.5 years growth in use of grammatical structures and an increase of 2.4 levels as measured by the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA)/ Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (BAS).

1. Direct Board Participation

The Beginning

In the spring of 2009 after a discussion with a principal regarding the challenges some of his elementary students were having learning to read, the Division team conducted research regarding possible interventions that would target the areas where students were having difficulty. The Division team reviewed research around oral language acquisition and its impact on learning how to read. One of the Division team members had attended the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers Conference a few years prior to that and had learned about an intervention called Talking Partners developed by Education Works, an educational consultancy based in North Yorkshire, England.

Talking Partners is a programme designed to improve the way children communicate across the curriculum, enabling them to be independent and skillful speakers and listeners . . . It encourages them to listen more actively and talk for a range of purposes and draws particular attention to the links between oracy and literacy . . . It's a targeted, time-limited (10 weeks) intervention that can be used with the whole class, small groups or individuals.

The Division team contacted Clare Reed at Education Works in England regarding the possibility of coming to Prince Albert to provide inservice on Talking Partners.

First Nations and Métis Education Achievement Fund

Thanks to a matching grant from the First Nations and Métis Education Achievement Fund the Division agreed to match the dollars provided. This allowed the opportunity to train all of the staff at the pilot school as well as the partnering First Nations school of Wahpeton. The funds provided covered the costs of the training, the resources and teacher release time for the partnering First Nations School.

The FNMAF project outlined three goals:

- Improve learning outcomes for First Nations and Métis and all students from Grades 1 – 3 in the language of instruction: English.
- Explore ways in which students coming to school with a first language(s) other than English are provided with opportunities to develop in that first language.
- Create opportunities for staff and community members to learn about the Talking Partners Strategies that support the inclusion of students within the regular classroom setting.

The FNMAF project also articulated an essential guiding question:

To what extent would explicit strategies in oral language development in the language of instruction, English, impact on the reading achievement of students in Grades 1-3.

The three-year plan outlined training and piloting the Talking Partners program in one school during the first year, and expanding to two other schools during the remaining three years. The plan also outlined plans to partner with additional First Nations and Métis Education organizations.

In October 2009 the Staff of St. Michael Community School and staff from Wahpeton received two days of inservice with Clare Reed. Staff training included all classroom teachers and one Talking Partner. This was to ensure smooth transitions for students identified as needing a second tier of intervention in order to boost oral language skills in the regular classroom. All staff used the strategies with their students as part of the classroom-based school wide instruction.

The School Division Coordinator of the project met regularly with St. Michael School Community Staff to monitor progress of the small group programming and discuss how the strategies were working in the classrooms. Time was also spent talking about how students in Talking Partners were transitioning back to the classroom.

One of the First Nations parents at the school assisted with the identification of books that First Nations and Métis students could identify with. The purchase of resources which included books, story props, puppets, etc. was made possible by the FNMAF and Division matching grant.

In the spring of 2010 a presentation was made to the Board by the St. Michael team regarding the data collected on vocabulary development, grammatical structure growth and reading gains. Other benefits of the program were also highlighted such as increased student confidence and participation in class, increased writing output, increased ability to communicate needs, as well as the ability to distinguish between figurative and literal language.

Expansion of the Initiative

Following the presentation the Prince Albert Catholic School Board expressed the desire and commitment to expand the program to both W.F. A. Turgeon Catholic Community School and St. John Community School and pick up the costs not covered by the FNMA fund.

The media ran an article in the local paper regarding Talking Partners initiative and Rick Closs, Understanding the Early Years Coordinator with the Prince Albert Grand Council, indicated interest in learning more about the program.

In the fall of 2010, the second year of the three-year plan, the Division partnered with Little Red River Education Authority and Education Staff from the Prince Albert Grand Council for inservice.

Clare Reed returned in the fall of 2011 for the third year and provided inservice to all of the Kindergarten, Elementary Student Support Services Teachers and Teacher Librarians in the Prince Albert Catholic Division. Partnering First Nation Education organizations included Sturgeon Lake First Nation, North West Education Council, Red Earth First Nation, as well as Prince Albert Grand Council Education staff. Clare also provided train-the-trainer inservice for six individuals so that they could in turn train teachers to deliver the program.

A trained Talking Partner from PAGC inserviced sixty PAGC teachers in January 2013. One of the trained Talking Partners from The Prince Albert Catholic School Division provided training to teachers in Horizon and Prairie Spirit School Divisions in May, 2013.

In the fall of 2016, the Prince Albert Catholic Board of Education expanded the Talking Partners program to St. Francis School and Ecole St. Anne School for a total of five schools providing this oral language intervention.

Most recently, on September 18-19, 2019, Prince Albert Catholic School Division provided Talking Partners training for 22 consultants, senior and in-school administrators, and teachers from Northern Lights School Division. This training will allow the NLSD staff to provide classroom and targeted oral language development and support.

Priorities and Strategic Directions of the Prince Albert Catholic School Board of Education have consistently identified the most important priorities of all staff for 2011-2014, 2014-2017, and 2017-2020. The Talking Partners program aligns with the Board's strategic plan:

To optimize learning for all students, improving outcomes for First Nations and Métis students.

Strategic Direction - Provide quality education services focusing on assessment with high school completion the goal for all students.

Strategic Direction – Provide educationally appropriate infrastructure, programming, and community supports to optimize student engagement in learning.

Strategic Direction - Build Leadership to improve student learning, strengthening both teacher and administrative leadership.

2. Innovative Nature of the Initiative

Talking Partners programming is designed using constructivist principles where the Talking Partner (the trained teacher) works with groups of three students over a ten-week period for 30 minutes a day. Students are engaged in a continuum of linguistic and cognitive tasks that develop more active listening and the ability to talk for a range of purposes in all areas of the curriculum. The program emphasizes praise, a positive environment, and specific prompts to extend learning in all areas. Talking Partners draws particular attention to the links between oracy and literacy. There is no other program we have found that focuses on oral language development as the link to supporting EAL learners improve in reading and writing. Standardized assessment shows average gains of over a year after a ten-week program. Students are able to participate more fully in the classroom. The success also shows in increased control over structure and form in writing.

The intervention is tailored to the students. Culturally relevant resources (books, props, puppets, etc.) that reflect the students allow them to make authentic connections and help foster language development. The resources are also chosen in consultation with classroom teachers in order to support the extension of Talking Partners strategies in the classroom.

3. Sustaining our Innovation

The Division strives to approach work from a student-centered perspective in a systematic manner. The Talking Partners innovation aligns with the Prince Albert Catholic Board's strategic plan and continues to build in the support for the acquisition of oral language competencies for all students including our First Nations and Métis students across the school division. The following are examples of how the project is sustained:

- Ongoing professional development for the Talking Partners
- Focus on supports and improved outcomes for all students including our First Nations and Métis learners.
- All levels of staff engaged in language acquisition strategies (classroom teachers, support staff, consultants coordinators, etc.) through the current funding allocation and grant options
- Collection of data and formal reporting of measures to the Board of Education, Ministry of Education Annual Report and School Learning Improvement plans.
- Development and provision of resources to establish supports to build capacity throughout the school division to implement Talking Partners (including entire staff building and understanding and common language regarding Language Acquisition Strategies).
- Building partnerships with First Nations and Métis Education Organizations, where applicable, in support of shared management of the provincial education system.

4. Cost / Benefit Analysis

Talking Partners has proven to be a promising practice. Results indicate growth in the language of instruction and improvement in oral language skills are resulting in improved reading achievement. The Board of Education is thankful for the funds provided by the First Nations and Métis Education Achievement Fund to support the three-year introduction of the innovation from 2009 to 2012. 2019-2020 marks the 10th year of Talking Partners program in the Prince Albert Catholic School Division. The continuation of Talking Partners is due to the involvement and ongoing support provided by the Board of Education.

The cost of placing five half-time Talking Partner teachers to provide a second tier of intervention for approximately 135-145 students per year has resulted in an average achievement in the following areas after 10 weeks of intervention:

- 1.5 years growth in vocabulary development
- 1.5 years growth in grammar

- increase of 2.4 reading levels (as measured by the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA) from 2011-2016, and the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) from 2016-present day).

5. Partnerships in Support of the Innovation

The Division continues to experience positive feedback in regards to participation and delivery of the Talking Partners program. The initiative has expanded within the literacy programming of the schools within the Prince Albert Grand Council. After receiving training from PACSD, Northern Lights School Division will be rolling out this initiative in their school division as well.

The activities in the program gave students the chance to use language purposefully to get their ideas across to others. Students learned how to ask questions, how to understand story structure and story language.

Talking Partner

Book of the Week – The Mitten Tree
 During a read-aloud session one of the students commented: *"I know that's a blue spruce tree because I learned that in Talking Partners."*

Gr. 2 Student

Students are "taking more risks" with language as they are initiating conversation as well as asking and answering questions. The students are using more complete sentences.

Student Support Services Teacher

Students are referring to the graphic of the flower with the 5 Ws when writing and the writing is more detailed. Some students who had difficulty writing before now want to write stories and refer to the graphic.

Gr. 3 Teacher

Sixty PAGC teachers from 25 schools participated in Talking Partners training in Prince Albert. A PAGC Talking Partners pilot in two schools (2011-2012) saw oral language gains of two to three years in most students. This is significant given that oral language fluency is a pre-requisite for a smooth transition to literacy. We are very excited about sharing this innovative language program and look forward improved outcomes in reading and writing as well as language fluency.

Rick Closs, Coordinator Understanding the Early Years - PAGC

22 consultants, senior and in-school administrators and teachers from Northern Lights School Division (NLSD) participated in Talking Partners training facilitated by Prince Albert Catholic School Division (September 2019). This is part of NLSD's Ministry EAL Assessment Project for 2019.

6. Improved Student Achievement

For students that have participated in the Talking Partners 10-week intervention, Prince Albert Catholic School Division has recorded the anecdotal reports of improvement in the areas of self-confidence, self-esteem, and increased class participation.

There is also documented evidence of improved student achievement for students participating in the 10-week Talking Partners program. There are three indicators used to determine student growth. Students are screened for the program and a criterion is applied to determine and select students for the 10-week intervention. A pre and post assessment is used to measure:

1. Language Information Growth
2. Grammatical Structures
3. Reading Levels

Longitudinal Talking Partners Data –

Pilot in 1 School – 2009-2010; 3 Schools - 2010-2013; 5 Schools – 2013-present

In the ten years that Prince Albert Catholic School division has been providing the Talking Partners intervention, the average oral language gain made by the students in the 10-week program was 1.5 years of age equivalence for language information growth and 1.5 years of age equivalence for language grammatical structures growth (as measured by the Renfrew Action Picture Test).

The average gains made by students in the 10-week program in their reading ability was 2.4 levels (as measured by the Diagnostic Reading Assessment tool – DRA from 2011-2016 and measured by the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System – BAS – from 2016-present day).

Please see the attached chart on the next page with detailed achievement results from the Talking Partners intervention program from 2009-2019.

10 years of Talking Partners Results 2009 - 2019

The average gains made by students in the 10 week program in their reading ability was approximately a half-year's growth (as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Assessment Tool)

	2009-10 (Pilot in 1 school)	2010-11 (3 schools implement)	2011-12 (3 schools)	2012-13 (3 schools)	2013-14 (3 schools)	2014-15 (3 schools)	2015-16 (3 schools)	2016-17*** (5 schools)	2017-18*** (5 schools)	2018-19*** (5 schools)	10 year average
Language Information Growth (RAP)*	1.2 years	1.5 years	1.9 years	1.9 years	1.8 years	1.9 years	2.1 years	1.5 years	1.4 years	1.5 years	1.5 years
Grammatical Structures (RAP)	1.0 years	1.4 years	1.9 years	1.8 years	1.4 years	1.5 years	1.9 years	1.2 years	1.3 years	1.3 years	1.5 years
Reading Levels (DRA)** (Fountas*** used in 2016-17 to present)			4.4 levels	3 levels	3 levels	2.3 levels	2.1 levels	1.7 levels	1.7 levels	1.1 levels	2.4 levels

* RAP = Renfrew Action Picture Test

** DRA = Diagnostic Reading Assessment (10 levels is approximately 1 year's growth)

*** Fountas = Fountas and Pinnell Reading Assessment (5 levels is approximately 1 year's growth)

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