



School-family partnerships leading to improved oracy outcomes

ST JOHN'S ANGLICAN COLLEGE

At St John's Anglican College, oracy is blooming, thanks to a range of strategies being undertaken in partnership with teachers and parents.

Improving declining 'oracy skills', also known as students' oral language development, is a challenge for schools everywhere and tackling it was a firm goal for the K-12 independent school in Brisbane's south-west, which has a high proportion of students with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D).

St John's undertook practitioner research through Independent Schools Queensland's Research in Schools program. Now after four years of trialling a range of successive and innovative strategies in the program, the school is reaping the rewards, - evidenced by standardised testing results, observations and feedback data.

Parents brought on the journey

Bringing students' parents along on their child's learning journey – and educating them in how they can support oracy strategies at home – was key to success, according to St John's Anglican College EAL/D Co-ordinator Ronnelle Sanders.

Ronnelle is overseeing the school's long-term oracy project, with the support of Head of Junior School Martin Brownlow and several key staff members.

"A few years ago, we attended an Independent Schools Queensland event on parent engagement and heard the statistic that by the time a child graduates from high school, only 15 percent of their waking hours will have been spent at school," Ronnelle says.

"Families responded positively and the results from having parents working in partnership with the school ensured their oracy strategies were more effective."

"That was a bit of a lightbulb moment and we realised parents had to be a part of whatever oracy strategies we were going to try.

So, we spoke with our parents and said, 'while we know you are giving your child to us to educate and care for them, we only have them some of the time. You are still a very important member of the team, and you can make an important contribution to their education'."

Families responded positively and the results from having parents working in partnership with the school ensured their oracy strategies were more effective. "It means whatever is being taught at school is also being talked about and applied at home," said Ronnelle.

Case Study



L-R: St John's Anglican College
EAL/D Co-ordinator
Ronnelle Sanders, Year 1
teacher Rebecca Hurley,
Year 5 teacher Sandra Corry

Slow-and-steady approach pays dividends

Through the Research in Schools program, the College's oracy program has followed a slow-and-steady approach, with three distinct phases.

Phase 1: Take-home Blossom Bags™ for Early Years students

The bags were filled with fun family literacy activities based around a story book, as well as fridge magnets with simple tips and ideas for having enriching conversations with children at home.

The school also translated parent-specific literacy brochures into different languages and modelled literacy strategies to parents at specially organised family events.

Phase 2: Laminated Talk Time Keys

These included a range of conversation starters for the dinner table, car trips and any opportunity parents had to talk with their child.

The keys were divided up into coloured categories, with open-ended questions, requiring a child to answer with more than just a 'yes' or 'no'. Ronnelle explained this helped to promote deeper, more meaningful conversations, – stimulating a child's cognitive development.

"We began these in the Early Years and were pleasantly surprised when some of our Upper Primary families were also keen to be involved."

Phase 3: Talk Agreements

The most recent initiative introduced in 2021 was Talk Agreements, based on the concept of dialogic teaching.

Dialogic teaching involves using the power of collaborative talk between teachers-students and peers-peers to engage student interest, provoke thinking, build, connect and deepen understanding, expand ideas and perspectives, and develop the ability to justify and evaluate arguments.

Talk Agreements include specific elements of oral language for students to master, for example, effective listening skills, considering the

social/emotional characteristics of the audience and thinking about the language and gestures used.

Focus elements or goals are collaboratively selected by teachers and their students. These goals are linked to the curriculum and are embedded across every part of the school day by every teacher and included where appropriate in assessment tasks.

Talk Agreements were initially trialled in Years 1 and 5 but from 2023 will be expanded across the Junior School from Kindergarten to Year 6.

Once again parents will be included in the journey, sharing the current goals within the class Talk Agreement through My Learning, diaries, and information nights. This will include practical ways they can apply these goals within talk situations at home.

Colleagues working together towards a goal

Ronnelle paid tribute to her teaching colleagues, including Year 1 teacher Rebecca Hurley and Year 5 teacher Sandra Corry who are a valuable part of the project team and trialled the dialogic teaching methods in their classrooms.

Those trials gave the College the confidence to make Talk Agreements a whole campus initiative from 2023. Both Rebecca and Sandra will continue to lead and support their Junior School colleagues throughout the Talk Agreement implementation.

Read more

www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au/2020/11/10/talk-time-keys-one-schools-simple-strategy-to-enrich-conversations-at-home/

www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/St-Johns-Anglican-College-QISPN-case-study.pdf

Visit www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au for more information on the research that underpins the importance of "parent engagement" and its impact on student achievement and wellbeing.