AIR®
AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH®

Talking is Teaching
Talk, Read, Sing in Michigan

Authors: Stephanie D'Souza, Patricia Garcia-Arena, Isobel Sorensen, Lauren Burr, Lisa White, Natalie Tucker-Bradway, Ann-Marie Faria

Introduction

In 2020, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Office of Great Start was awarded the Preschool Development Birth through Five (PDG B-5) renewal grant. In 2019, the state of Michigan partnered with ***Too Small to Fail*** (TSTF) to implement public awareness campaigns in Michigan. While Talking is Teaching is currently used in cities and communities across the nation (Tulsa, Oklahoma; Oakland, California; San Francisco, California; and Chicago, Illinois), Michigan used PDG B-5 funds to support the first statewide rollout of the **"Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing"** campaign.

For the Talking is Teaching evaluation, MDE contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to evaluate the planning, implementation, and preliminary outcomes of Talking is Teaching campaigns across the state. The evaluation showed that, in general, sites were eager to integrate the Talking is Teaching campaign into their communities. While the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to the rollout, sites still found ways to engage families across Michigan. As the campaign continues to roll out, lessons learned from the initial evaluation findings will help support successful implementation.

In this brief, we describe key findings from the Talking is Teaching statewide rollout from May 2020 through March 2021. We conclude by offering recommendations for future implementation of Talking is Teaching in Michigan.

About Talking is Teaching

"Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing," which was launched in 2014 by *Too Small To Fail* (TSTF), a joint initiative of the Clinton Foundation and the Opportunity Institute, is a public awareness and action campaign designed to share information with families about the critical role they play in their child's early brain and language development. Talking is Teaching supports families in using concrete tools to talk, read, and sing with their young children from birth through age 5. The campaign consists of three strategies that can be adapted to local communities:

- **High-quality materials** such as tote bags containing developmentally appropriate books, tip sheets, and textiles like blankets and onesies.
- **Environmental prompts** such as billboards and posters in community spaces and social media posts.
- **Trusted messengers** who are trained to directly engage with families about the importance of using everyday moments to talk, read, and sing with their children. Examples of trusted messengers include librarians, preschool teachers, and grocery store staff.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The evaluation answered the following research questions:

1. How was Talking is Teaching implemented across the state?
    a. Which counties in Michigan implemented Talking is Teaching? What variations of the campaign were used?
    b. How many families received Talking is Teaching materials or messaging?
2. To what extent do campaign materials support young children's physical health, nutrition, oral health, and social-emotional learning?

DATA COLLECTION

To answer research question 1, AIR used a mix of data, including documents that sites created to plan for Talking is Teaching implementation—called *Community Action Plans*—which were submitted by 30 sites; training attendance sheets collected by MDE; qualitative data from key informant interviews (KIIs) with site directors and parent liaisons at eight sites as well as with MDE and TSTF staff; and data collected by TSTF that documented implementation effectiveness at each site, which were submitted by 28 sites and are referred to as *campaign metrics data*. Information from the KIIs was used to answer research question 2.

Evaluation Findings

Many evaluations assess fidelity of implementation to determine how closely implementation on the ground matched that of the original model. Assessing level of fidelity of implementation is useful for interpreting and contextualizing outcomes and identifying where subsequent implementation efforts can be improved. The Talking is Teaching model, however, is intended to be adapted to local settings. While TSTF offers general guidance on campaign implementation, their guiding principles caution against a "one-size-fits-all" approach and emphasize the importance of developing campaigns that meet local needs. As a result, evaluation activities assess fidelity of implementation by examining the three core strategies that comprise the Talking is Teaching campaign model.

Talking is Teaching was implemented in the majority of Michigan counties.

The statewide rollout of Talking is Teaching in Michigan included 62 of Michigan's 83 counties, indicating a far-reaching campaign. Great Start Collaboratives (GSCs) or Great Start Parent Coalitions (GSPCs) led the campaigns. The GSCs and GSPCs included a wide variety of community leaders, parents and families, educational leaders, early childcare providers, and infant mental health specialists who met regularly to work on campaign implementation. The Talking is Teaching campaign included sites in each of the four Early Childhood Support Network regions.[1] Most of the 30 sites that submitted Community Action Plans were rural (75%); the remaining sites were urban or a mix of urban and rural areas.

TALKING IS TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused substantial disruptions to the rollout of the Talking is Teaching campaigns. Many sites reported delivering more content virtually than they originally had planned. As a result, many sites pivoted from largely in-person events and activities to increased use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) to provide virtual offerings, such as virtual playgroups and videos of activities between parents and children.

Information obtained from KIIs confirmed that TSTF and MDE leadership provided sites with supports and guidance for rolling out the campaign. During the planning stages and throughout the first year of implementation, TSTF provided hands-on support to local campaigns and collaborated closely with MDE staff. TSTF delivered webinars, held coffee hours, and disseminated newsletters, in addition to offering regular support through email correspondence and phone calls with local sites. During the KIIs, sites reported mixed experiences with state-level support. MDE convened monthly implementation meetings with sites, which afforded them opportunities to connect with one another and to share ideas and materials beginning in the fall of 2020 and increased in regularity from March 2021 onward. In addition, MDE provided individualized

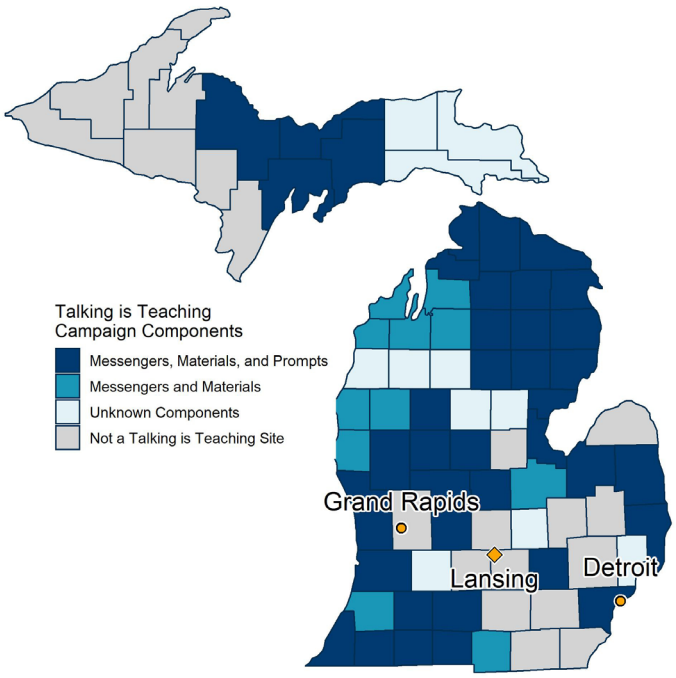
[1] Nearly half of the sites are in the western region, one-quarter are in the northern region, 20% are in the eastern region, and the remaining 10% are in the southeast region.

guidance and support to sites through email correspondence and phone calls. While some sites felt the level of support and clarity was sufficient, other sites felt they needed greater levels of support, particularly in the planning stage and for developing the details of the Community Action Plan. Sites reported that state supports ramped up throughout the year.

Talking is Teaching campaigns were adapted to meet the needs of the local community.

Most Talking is Teaching sites across Michigan (61%) implemented all three strategies of the campaign, and all sites planned to implement at least two Talking is Teaching strategies as indicated in the Community Action Plans (Exhibit 1). Based on information gleaned from the interviews, local sites clearly had tailored implementation according to the needs of their community. The national campaign model offered a structure for implementation, and local sites implemented high-quality materials, deployed trusted messengers, and installed environmental prompts in ways that would best connect to the families in their community.

Exhibit 1. Map of Talking is Teaching Sites, by County and Core Component



Source: Community Action Plans and Trusted Advisor Grant applications

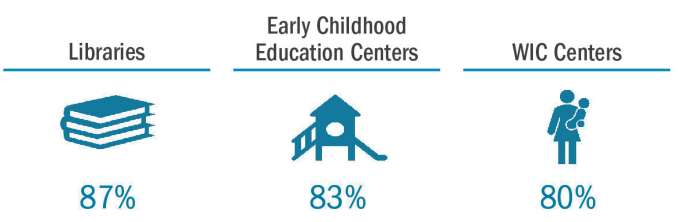
For example, sites used a variety of strategies to target families in specific communities. Some sites built partnerships with churches to reach African-American families and traveled into rural areas to reach families who lack transportation. Some sites translated their materials into other languages to make the content accessible to non-English-speaking families and ensured that messaging was relevant to the community. In addition, sites with a large number of farmers and migrants developed materials and activities related to fruits and vegetables.

> "That's really smart... to roll it out through collaboratives, because my position is basically designed to have relationships. It's to have as many different relationships as I can possibly have with anyone who's touching early childhood."
>
> *—Site coordinator*

Community partnerships were an integral part of the Talking is Teaching campaign in Michigan.

Building community partnerships was a key part of implementing all three core strategies of Talking is Teaching and ensuring that messaging is widely disseminated. The most common partnerships were with libraries; early childhood education centers; and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) centers (Exhibit 2). All sites reported partnering with a wide variety of organizations, from small, local businesses to larger, public-facing organizations that serve the community. Partnerships were developed in critical spaces that serve children and families, such as early childhood programs and libraries. Sites also partnered with spaces that are not conventionally used to target early childhood learning and development, such as

Exhibit 2. Top Three Community Spaces for Talking is Teaching Campaigns (n = 30)



Source: Community Action Plans.
Note. Sites implemented their local campaigns in multiple community spaces.

laundromats, car repair shops, post offices, and grocery stores. This diverse range of partnerships helped ensure that many families in the community were reached through the campaign as they engaged in daily activities.

Messengers: More than 1,000 trusted messengers were trained for the Michigan Talking is Teaching campaigns.

Training **trusted messengers** was a major focus of the sites, but this strategy was heavily restricted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a wide variety of trusted messengers were trained at nearly all sites. According to campaign metrics data collected by TSTF among a sample of 28 sites, 92% of sites reported training trusted messengers. Each site trained about 51 trusted messengers, on average; some sites trained many more (425 trusted messengers). During the statewide rollout in Michigan, a total of 1,220 trusted messengers were trained.

> "That's part of, to me, the value of a trusted messenger. They're having a conversation. They're not directing or preaching at you. So, a pastor gets through this process, this training, and he loves everything about it. And he says, 'This is profound simplicity.' He said, 'It's powerful, but it's doable and simple.' As the pastor, [I] knew nothing about brain development and the power of words and why babies need words… I've got this now. And [I] can share this."
>
> *—Site coordinator*

Sites reported recruiting community members to serve as trusted messengers. These people typically engaged with families through their professions. Examples include early childhood educators, home visitors, pediatricians, librarians, grocery store staff, faith leaders, barbers and hairstylists, and police officers.

Materials: Talking is Teaching sites in Michigan successfully distributed a wide array of high-quality materials adapted specifically for their communities.

Campaign metrics data collected by TSTF at 28 sites describe how many families were reached through the Talking is Teaching campaign. Analysis of the data on tote bag distribution showed that 79% of sites distributed tote bags. These sites distributed a total of 8,621 tote bags to families with messaging about early literacy. This number is probably a conservative or low estimate because it represents about one-third of the sites that implemented Talking is Teaching. During interviews, sites described partnerships as key to sharing materials with the community. **High-quality materials** included, but were not limited to, developmentally appropriate books, tip sheets for parents, refrigerator magnets, cooking aprons for children, baby bibs, stickers, mirrors, and bookmarks. Some sites also reported efforts to engage hard-to-reach or marginalized families by translating materials into Spanish, Arabic, Burmese, and Native American languages.

Prompts: Sites across Michigan installed environmental prompts in a variety of community spaces.

According to the campaign metrics data, slightly less than half of the sites (46%) implemented **environmental prompts** as part of their Talking is Teaching implementation—most commonly, posters, billboards, and yard signs. However, it is difficult to quantify the number of families exposed to these types of messaging in communities. Partnerships enabled prompts and messaging to reach families in many different ways. Talking is Teaching sites used the environmental prompts and messaging in a wide variety of community spaces, including libraries, early childhood programs, beauty shops/barber shops, laundromats, pediatric clinics, WIC offices, homeless shelters, federally qualified healthcare centers, convenience stores, playgrounds, department stores, and car repair shops. Counties with extensive trails and parks reported an increase in the display of campaign materials in outdoor spaces.

Sites varied in their data collection efforts to document their progress or impact.

Data collection efforts to understand the impact of Talking is Teaching campaigns in local communities varied across sites. As discussed earlier, less than half of the sites submitted campaign metrics data. Obtaining data from all sites on basic implementation efforts would provide greater clarity about the reach of the statewide rollout.

In interviews, participants discussed varying levels of data collection. Some sites reported having a well-developed data collection system, while others requested supports to bolster their data collection efforts. In general, sites reported tracking the number of families who receive high-quality materials. Sites reported that, moving forward, they would benefit from gaining a better understanding of families' reactions to tote bags and other materials distributed as well as how families are using them to engage their children. Some sites obtained this information through innovative approaches such as including QR codes with the materials that link to feedback surveys. In addition, some sites reported difficulty in tracking the reach of their campaigns through digital platforms, whether through websites or social media. Greater support for data collection efforts would improve sites' ability to understand the reach and effectiveness of their campaigns (see the Recommendations section).

Most Talking is Teaching sites funded their campaigns through multiple funding sources.

Michigan Talking is Teaching campaigns were supported through a variety of funding sources. Most sites (61%) funded their Talking is Teaching campaigns through a combination of Trusted Advisor Grants and other GSC/GSPC funding. Some sites used only one of these funding sources: 8% used only Trusted Advisor funds, and 6% used just the 32p Grant funding.[2] For one-quarter of the sites, the funding source was unclear based on the data available for the evaluation.

Campaign materials target young children's physical health, nutrition, oral health, and social-emotional learning.

The focus of the first-year evaluation of the statewide rollout was to document the planning and implementation process. Outcomes data for physical health, nutrition, oral health, and social-emotional learning were not collected at this initial stage. However, according to interview data, sites stated that the materials targeted multiple developmental domains. For example, some campaigns partnered with dental offices to promote discussions of oral health. Playgrounds and trails have increasingly become spaces for Talking is Teaching messaging, which touches upon physical health. Some sites partnered with grocery stores to promote

> "I think Talking Is Teaching for the families of our community allows us to talk about the value of rich interactions between a parent and a child or a family member and a child in a light, fun way. And it has allowed us to really start talking about attachment and social-emotional development and what an important role our parents or our families play in that… and families absolutely love the materials."
>
> *—Site coordinator*

[2] Section 32p Grants funds may be used for activities that support the local GSC/GSPC's Great Start Strategic Plan, and must be designed to contribute to achieving the four early childhood outcomes, through a system that includes supports for children birth through age 8 in physical health, social-emotional health, family supports and basic needs, parent education and child advocacy, and early education and care. The Section 32p Grants funds are intended to support the core costs for implementation of the GSC/GSPC, as well as provide for programs and services that will lead to better outcomes for children. For more information, see https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/FY20_32p_Budget_Guidance_FINAL_668702_7.pdf.

messaging related to healthy food choices, and grocery store staff have served as trusted messengers. Interviewees consistently reported that social-emotional learning was a strong focus of the early literacy materials. Some materials distributed to families encouraged a better understanding of developmental milestones, which sites linked to child abuse prevention. Sites also reported distributing materials through Welcome Baby early learning programs to emphasize attachment and nurturing parenting.

Continuous Improvement Efforts

Over the past year, MDE made several changes to program implementation based on feedback from the sites, including (a) establishing monthly implementation meetings to answer ongoing implementation questions and offer opportunities to brainstorm across sites; (b) creating a Google Drive space for sites to share materials and resources with one another; and (c) along with TSTF, providing individualized supports on an as-needed basis, such as emails, e-newsletters, office hours, webinars, and one-on-one calls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for MDE emerged from the first-year evaluation and may benefit future campaign implementation.

- **Provide sites with greater support during the planning stages.** Responses from sites varied regarding the level of support needed at the state level. While some sites required little support in planning their campaign, some sites expressed the need for greater support and clarity in the planning stages, although sites indicated that state supports did increase over time. Possible supports during the planning stages include an initial training session, one-on-one conversations between MDE and local sites, and sharing examples of Community Action Plans so that sites can learn from existing campaigns.
- **Provide sites with access to Talking is Teaching campaigns across the country.** The TSTF Foundation provides a wide range of supports to local campaigns, and sites felt that TSTF was very responsive. One area for further development is increased interactions with more established Talking is Teaching campaigns across the country. While some interaction currently takes place, additional efforts could include periodically distributed newsletters offering tips and ideas, regular meet-and-greets, and examples of Community Action Plans from established sites.
- **Generate Michigan-focused materials and resources that could be used by local sites.** While sites appreciate having local autonomy over their campaigns and the ability to tailor messaging and materials for their communities, some sites stated that coordinated statewide campaign efforts would help with economies of scale in producing materials and would promote a greater sense of cohesion for the statewide rollout. Some sites noted that translating materials into multiple languages was one area of difficulty; this challenge could be addressed through development of coordinated statewide materials.
- **Encourage sites to use the central repository.** MDE quickly responded to sites' requests to develop a central repository to share materials. Based on low levels of usage, however, sites may need more encouragement to upload their materials.

(continued on the next page)

RECOMMENDATIONS *(continued)*

- **Provide greater guidance and support for data collection efforts.** Consistent data collection and reporting are needed across sites to understand program implementation and impact. Given that sites varied in their ability to collect and report data across activities, MDE should more clearly define expectations for data collection and provide supports that help sites meet these expectations. For example, MDE could develop material feedback forms for sites to distribute and could provide guidance to sites that require greater support in developing their data collection plans.
- **Provide additional support for Talking is Teaching campaign management.** Given the scale of the statewide rollout and the general excitement expressed by many about the campaign, local sites would benefit from increased oversight and coordination from a larger MDE team to support their implementation efforts.
- **Facilitate corporate and federal partnerships.** Sites reported having difficulty establishing partnerships with corporate businesses and with federal partners such as post offices because of bureaucratic challenges. They requested help from the state to facilitate these partnerships.
- **Support sustainability efforts.** Multiple sites cited concerns about the sustainability of the Talking is Teaching campaign after the grant cycle ends. MDE encourages sites to consider avenues for sustaining the local campaign.

AIR®
AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH®

1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor | Arlington, VA 22202-3289 | 202.403.5000
AIR.ORG

Copyright © 2021 American Institutes for Research®. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, website display, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the American Institutes for Research. For permission requests, please use the Contact Us form on AIR.ORG.

This brief was supported by the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Initiative (PDG B-5), Grant Number 90TP0055-01-00, from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, or U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

14651 v09_7/21