



Topical Talk in Kent Catholic Schools' Partnership

2025-26 Highlights



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Foreword



It is a great pleasure to introduce this inaugural publication celebrating the work of our schools in partnership with The Economist Educational Foundation. This collaboration reflects our shared commitment to nurturing articulate, thoughtful and informed young people across the Kent Catholic Schools' Partnership.

At the heart of our Catholic educational mission lies a deep respect for the dignity of every individual and the importance of dialogue, rooted in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Topical Talk brings these principles to life, enabling pupils to encounter diverse perspectives; engage thoughtfully with current affairs; and explore themes such as justice, human dignity and the common good. In doing so, pupils develop the confidence to express their own views with clarity and integrity, while respectfully listening. As global events and influential voices, such as Pope Leo, shape debate on conflict and justice, it is vital that our pupils are equipped with the language, understanding and critical awareness to engage meaningfully and compassionately with the world around them.

This year has brought many highlights, including our strongest ever engagement in the Festival and the wonderful achievement of a pupil from More Park receiving the Standpoint Award. Pupils across our schools have engaged enthusiastically with the programme and these successes are a testament to the dedication of staff and the expertise provided by The Foundation's facilitators.

As we look ahead, particularly in light of the national curriculum review, we are excited to extend this work even further across our schools. The increasing emphasis on oracy and media literacy strongly reinforces the importance of programmes such as Topical Talk, which equip pupils with the vocabulary, confidence and critical-thinking skills needed to navigate an ever-changing world. By engaging with real-world issues; analysing different sources and perspectives; and learning to articulate their views with clarity and respect, our pupils are developing the essential competencies required for both academic success and responsible citizenship. I hope you enjoy this publication and see clearly the positive impact this partnership is having on pupils' confidence, communication and overall progress.

Sarah McBennett
Director of Primary Education at Kent Catholic Schools' Partnership

Our partnership

An overview

2025



NOVEMBER 2025

Teacher training delivered to 25 teachers

2026



JANUARY - MARCH 2026

24 classes take part in Topical Talk Festival



MAY 2026

Online teacher training on media literacy



MAY - JULY 2026

10 classes take part in the Summer Oracy Project



JULY 2026

Celebration event at *The Economist's* offices in London



This year in numbers

1300+

students have had the opportunity to discuss current affairs

30+

teachers trained, tripling our reach from 2024-25

100%

of teachers recommended the training



What the students say...

Student

St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Northfleet

Technology is advancing faster than students can react and raw talent isn't enough unless we learn to question, debate and understand the forces shaping our future. Critics say schools are already overloaded, but avoiding real-world discussions doesn't save time: it creates unprepared students. Making Topical Talk compulsory would ensure every young person develops the critical thinking, communication and judgement that no machine can replace.

Student

More Park Catholic Primary School, West Malling

During [Topical Talk] discussions, I could exchange opinions with other people. This helped me to accept other people's opinions and also to see a problem from more perspectives. Looking at others' points of view sparks creativity and inspiration.

Discussing diverse topics increased my creativity in writing, along with my critical thinking. It significantly increased my confidence and strengthened the way I speak about my opinions.

Student

St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Deal

Topical Talk and The Economist Educational Foundation have encouraged us to include ourselves in politics and the important questions that we wouldn't usually think about.

Student

St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Deal

I used to not care about the news and thought it was quite boring but Topical Talk has helped me realise that I am interested in certain topics – and that actually being aware about the news at a young age can be an important life skill for when I'm older. Another thing I realised is that many people have different opinions and views, which I personally didn't agree with.



In 2026, Kent Catholic Schools' Partnership participated in the Topical Talk Festival for the third consecutive year.

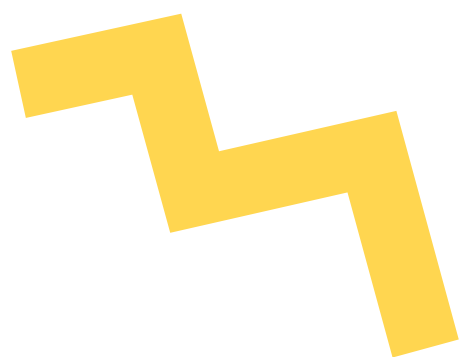
Each week, teachers led a classroom discussion about the news using a Topical Talk Headlines lesson. Students then logged into the Festival Student Hub and joined conversations about the news story with peers from 25 countries across the globe. At the end of the Festival, they created Standpoints – their final say on their favourite Festival topic.

This year, 24 classes from Kent Catholic Schools' Partnership took part – our greatest number ever.

Student
St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Deal

I enjoyed learning about the news because scrolling through the comments and reading various opinions sometimes made me change my mind and follow their side. This has helped me actually understand the topic better, observe what they say and try to make the same impact they have.

To add it all up, the Festival has really helped me understand certain topics I was never really aware of and what problems they can cause if nobody knows about them. It has been a pleasure to discuss with others around the world and know about their experiences. I have been very interested and am glad to be a part of this Festival.



TOPIC

**The Winter Games:
talent or technology?**



Can richer teams buy advantage?

convivial_butterfly
St Peter's Catholic Primary School A

The teams with more money will get an advantage because not only do they have money to buy better tech, but also to buy better clothes or better shoes. This makes the Winter Games unfair because those shoes could be gripped or they could make someone faster. I agree with [other student] resplendent_blueberry: they said the games aren't completely fair because some countries have a bunch of money while others don't. I think that the Winter Games should take away certain tech because it could give people too big of an advantage.

chatty_fish
St Mary's Catholic Primary School A

I disagree [that the Olympics and Paralympics are fair] because if SOME teams can afford [technology] others might not be able to. Other countries might be struggling with money and can't pay for sports technology where richer athletes have more money and it is not fair because they can't control their currency and pay. Some sports technology is necessary (goggles, chalk on hands for gymnasts) and others are 100% needed (footballs and basketballs) to the point where you can't do the sport without them.

I don't think that money should automatically win medals but it seems that this is the case. A lot of the time the better the technology, the more expensive it is, so that leads to why they should lower the prices. If they decide to keep technology, at least make all of the prices equal and the same quality throughout.

Unfortunately, there always has and always will be a story of those that have and those that don't. I think it would be much fairer if all countries put all funding into one pot and the money is shared out between competing countries. If all sport is about the athlete, then all the equipment should be the same: same hockey sticks, same bobsleigh. The individual can concern themselves with which trainers or running shoes they like or suit their feet.



TOPIC

Lowering the voting age



Who should influence your vote?

thankful_bilberry

St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Northfleet

I disagree with the statement that listening to people you trust is the safest way to decide how to vote, because voting is a personal responsibility that should reflect your own values and priorities. While family and friends may give you helpful advice, their opinions are based on their own experiences and beliefs, not yours. If you always rely on what they tell you, when you have to think on what you truly believe it may be hard. Sometimes they could make you believe things you don't necessarily believe in or like.

Another reason for my view is that when you rely on your friends and family too much it might restrict your independent thinking, and fast reactions make you a target to be easily drawn into things you don't want to be in. For example, if someone wanted you to join their team even though you think it would be a bad thing for you, they could practically force you and when you start you may not be able to stop because of pride.

It is important to listen to others, especially those you trust, because this can help you see different perspectives and viewpoints. However this should not be the only source of information you should rely on, as you can also research and gain an idea of what the rest of the world thinks (especially if the perspectives of your friends and family are the same) before making your decision.

In conclusion, although listening to people you trust can be helpful, it is not always the safest and smartest way to figure out your final decision on a vote. The safest approach is to think critically and precisely, and to choose the best option that fits you.

The risk of misinformation

incredible_jackfruit

The Holy Family Catholic Primary School

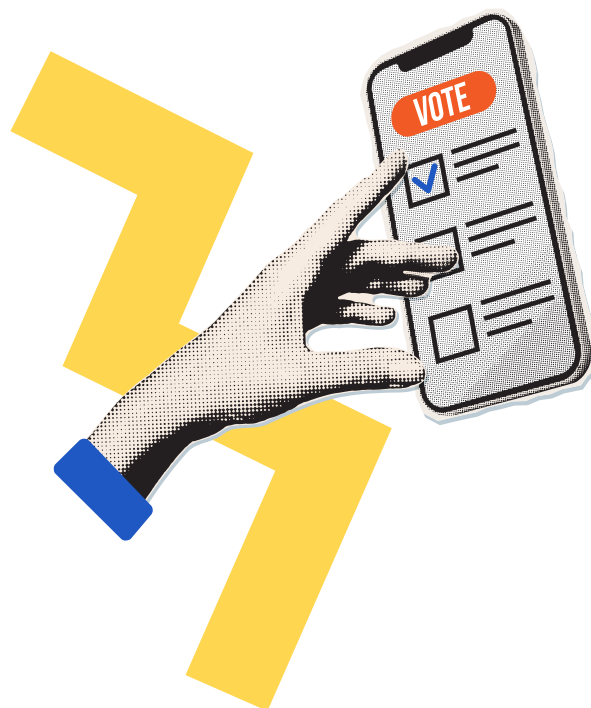
If all ages are influenced by misinformation, then we should probably raise the voting age (ages 21-25) to those who aren't receiving the wrong information. However, I think maturity matters. For example, you have to be very sure who you want to vote for without being influenced the wrong way. If older ages are influenced by misinformation, then we have to set a maximum age limit for voting because older ages are easily tricked by AI or fake news so they could have a misunderstanding, resulting in voting for the wrong person. Though younger ages might be tricked easily too, because they are potentially believing and gullible because most of this generation is on the internet and they might believe anything that is displayed on their screens. And older citizens do have a higher risk because they might not know what AI or misinformation is and they are very vulnerable to the news. So I think there should be a maximum and minimum age limit to vote so then the right people can have the right votes.

Should 16-year-olds help choose leaders?

peaceful_orange

St Edmund's Catholic Secondary School

In my opinion I think that 16- or 17-year-old kids deserve the right to vote because there are 1.5 million 16- or 17-year-old kids in the country. So one reason why they deserve to vote is because it is their country, so they should have a say on who is going to run it because they will be affected by any changes that might happen.



TOPIC

International aid: what's the best way forward?



Do famous voices really help?

jovial_fish

St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Deal C

I think awareness is important because if people knew about the current issues going on in the world it would be the first step to solving them. Many people don't pay attention to "ordinary people", but if for example someone you envy and respect does the same thing, everyone would be exploding with comments and care about what's going on.

A video I watched suggested that if a famous person spreads awareness, they would get 10x the amount of attention. For example, Celeste Barber used her social media account to raise awareness about the Australian bush fires in 2020, and she later opened a fundraiser to raise money. This act motivated people globally to donate over \$50 million in only a few days. If somebody else did this, they probably wouldn't get the audience and attention they were hoping for.

However, others might argue that fame and favouritism doesn't immediately mean attention and support, and you would need foundations and organisations to actually assist the project. Others might also say many people will argue or disagree with the rather "biased" person attempting to influence and guide their fans and supporters.

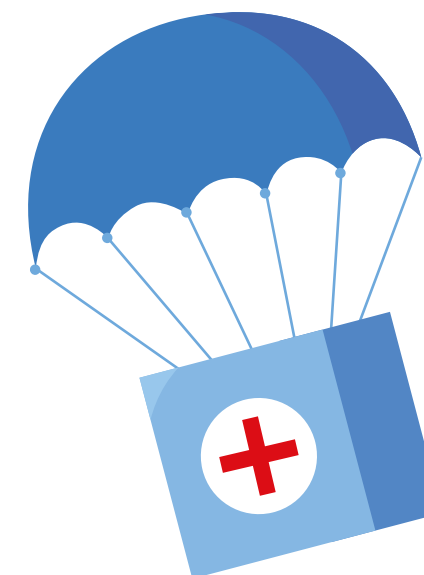
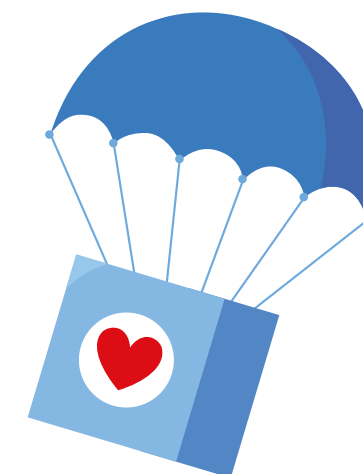
In addition, I think if numerous famous people all came together to support and promote helping others, everyone will understand the matters and issues that the world is facing. For example, a country that is in need or people affected by war.

Who should decide where aid goes?

free_explanation

More Park Catholic Primary School A

I think aid is more important because if people are in danger you can help, also if people are starving you can provide them food and medical assistance to help people in need. Defence is least important because you are only caring about your own country and not helping people who need it most. Aid also provides help to other countries and some countries won't lose so many citizens. But defence won't care about the poor and people in the world.



TOPIC

NATO: friends forever?



Neutral or alliance?

eager_dog

St John's Catholic Primary School B

I think that staying neutral or joining alliances can be risky either way. The reason being is because there are some countries that join alliances with another country, but that second country can either: betray the country that joined alliances with them and declare war on them, or the second country then joins alliances with that nation that tried to destroy the first.

Staying neutral can be risky too because for example, if a country is in war and then the country that DECLARED war takes over the first country, the nation that was inherited is gonna regret staying neutral.

In conclusion, joining alliances and staying neutral are both risky in their own ways.

Your country, your rules

convivial_tangerine

St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Broadstairs

I would make sure there is peace and kindness in my country. I would also do whatever [the people] want. I would also create a policy about having to be kind to poor people. We could stay neutral and attack when other people attack a fellow friend or someone who attacks us. We would try and resolve attacks before we go in. I would join an alliance where it allows any country like mine.



Standpoints

At the end of the Festival, students were invited to share their final opinions on a topic of their choice. These Standpoints were entered into a global competition.

Should a country's first responsibility be to help its own citizens or to help people in need around the world?

astounding_meaning

More Park Catholic Primary School



Scan the QR code to listen to their audio Standpoint.

Would giving 16-year-olds the vote improve democracy or just change the way campaigns are run?

easygoing_newspaper

St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Northfleet



Scan the QR code to watch their video Standpoint.

Does giving international aid sometimes cause more harm than good?

smart_river

St Michael Catholic Nursery and Primary School

International aid is an essential part of keeping a country going after a bad turn of events (a storm, forest fire or war). But people leading the countries could use the money for their own good and forget the whole reason they got the aid in the first place. You don't know what anyone could do with money, and they might get consumed with greed. Now, this is not the only thing that could go wrong with giving aid. For example, in a country that frequently experiences extreme heat, forest fires might continually spread – and the country providing aid might slowly but surely continue to lose their money. This wouldn't make sense.

I can understand the argument that countries need aid, especially after war or terribly bad weather, but what you need to understand is that although they would be failing as a country without any money and in bankruptcy, they should also develop defences against natural disasters or enemies that would put their country in real trouble. I also would suggest that before giving aid, you should get the leader of the country needing aid to sign something like a contract telling them to spend the money on their country and only their country.

In conclusion, I'm trying to say that yes, failing countries need aid, but sometimes they might use the money wrong or depend on other countries money too much too. Aid can be good, but it can also cause more harm than good.



Summer Oracy Project 2026

Specially designed for Kent Catholic Schools' Partnership in 2025, the Summer Oracy Project entered its second year. The project gives students the opportunity to explore a theme in the news in depth, anchored by three philosophical questions and discrete vocabulary.

Classes chose from topics such as: climate and environment; power and politics war and conflict; media literacy; and emerging technologies and online platforms. They took part in five lessons on the topic, each exploring a different recent news story to build context and deepen understanding. They then participated in a bespoke "discussion showcase" lesson, designed to move students away from traditional "for vs against" debating. Instead, the focus was on informed, critical discussion of complex issues, encouraging students to "disagree agreeably" while engaging thoughtfully with different perspectives.



Teacher voice

Laura Bourne is a Year 6 Teacher at St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Northfleet. She has taught Topical Talk in two different KCSP schools over a number of years. Here she explains what it's like to lead the way in media literacy education after witnessing how urgently it is needed.

Teaching Topical Talk over the past three years, across two different schools, has completely reinforced my belief that education should teach children how to think, not what to think. In a world where children are constantly exposed to news, social media and the opinions of others, media-literacy and current-affairs education are no longer optional extras; they are essential life skills.

One of the most valuable aspects of Topical Talk has been watching children develop the confidence to form their own opinions. Many pupils initially repeat the viewpoints they have heard at home or online, but through respectful discussion, questioning and reflection, they begin to think independently. As a teacher, I never share my own viewpoint during discussions. Instead, I create a space where children feel safe to explore ideas, challenge assumptions and listen to perspectives that may differ from their own.

The lessons provided by Topical Talk have been excellent in developing children's oracy skills. Pupils learn how to articulate their thoughts clearly, listen actively and engage in meaningful dialogue rather than simply trying to "win" an argument. I have seen children become more thoughtful, empathetic and curious about the world around them because they are encouraged to put themselves into the news stories being discussed.

What stands out most is the level of participation. In subjects such as English or maths, it is often the academically confident children who regularly contribute. However, in Topical Talk lessons, every child wants to have their say. It gives pupils who may not always shine in traditional academic subjects an opportunity to find their voice and recognise the value of their ideas. The skills they develop – speaking, listening, creativity, problem solving and critical thinking – are skills that will serve them well, far beyond the classroom. As educators, we are preparing children for society, not just examinations. Being academically successful is important, but so is being able to communicate effectively, think critically and engage respectfully with the wider world. Topical Talk has shown me that when children are trusted to discuss real issues, they rise to the challenge with maturity, insight and enthusiasm.

Laura Bourne, Teacher
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Northfleet

Case study: St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Deal

Led by headteacher Karen Riddell, St Mary's Catholic Primary School has implemented and embedded discussions about current affairs in Upper Key Stage 2 and further down the school.

Before integrating Topical Talk, St Mary's Catholic Primary School faced significant challenges common in schools with high levels of deprivation. Teachers identified speech, language, and oracy as key areas of concern. This was reflected in academic data, with Key Stage 2 SATs results consistently the lowest across all subjects. As a result, staff were initially hesitant, fearing that complex global discussions might be inaccessible to their pupils.

Beyond academic performance, the school community struggled with the pervasive influence of social media. Teachers observed a growing trend of pupils accepting online misinformation as fact. This was compounded by a lack of staff confidence; many teachers felt ill-equipped to facilitate discussions on sensitive or complex current affairs, having never implemented a structured programme of this nature before.

After limited engagement with Topical Talk in the previous academic year, the Upper Key Stage 2 team, Laura and Sarah, attended the training day in November and began delivering selected lessons in the autumn term. In the spring term, they took part in the Festival, finishing top of the KCSP leaderboard and placing in the top 10 schools and classes globally.

This success is closely linked to Karen's leadership in promoting conversations about current affairs across the school. In Early Years and Key Stage 1, she has introduced Picture This, ensuring that children begin developing critical thinking and oracy skills from the start of their time at St Mary's. The school prioritises pupil voice, with children regularly asked to share and explain their views.

Karen also displays the weekly Topical Talk topic in the school dining hall, enabling Year 3 and 4 pupils to engage in informal discussion and build anticipation for future lessons. This approach helps to embed conversations about current affairs across the school, creating a culture where pupils' thoughts and opinions are valued in the classroom, dining hall, playground, and wider community.



The classes' academic progress has been validated by external professional standards. A serving Ofsted inspector recently noted a marked difference in the students compared to the start of the academic year.

The inspector highlighted clear improvements in both the children's writing and their verbal communication, noting that pupils are now naturally integrating the sophisticated phrases and language acquired through their Topical Talk lessons.

Karen explains why she encourages discussions about current affairs in school:

I grew up in Northern Ireland in the middle of The Troubles. My parents never watched the news, the news was never on in our house, it was never talked about because my parents wanted to protect me or share their political views with me. Now I think, why didn't we talk about this? It's not until now that we talk about it. They sheltered me to protect me, but now I think children need to be exposed.

Upper Key Stage 2 teachers also report high levels of motivation from students – and impact beyond the classroom and into the community.

"The difference seen in all children with regards to their confidence to speak in front of their peers is considerably improved. By the end of Year 6 they are very competent at holding their own debate in front of their class."

Sarah, Year 6 teacher

"Topical Talk gives educators an insight into the misinformation or the worries that students hold, while ensuring students are more informed and given the facts. This has opened conversations both at home and in school."

Laura, Year 5 teacher

"Students' vocabularies expanded: phrases such as 'gender pay gap' and 'equality' have been used, whereas before they may not have been exposed to these terms."

Sarah, Year 6 teacher

"Before I started Topical Talk, I was more of a speaker than a listener. I stuck to my own point all the time and refused to change it. However, now that I am doing Topical Talk I am listening to others more and taking in what they say, allowing myself to change my mind."

Alice, Year 6 student

Case study: St Benedict's Catholic Primary School, Chatham

Teachers and students at St Benedict's Catholic Primary School were new to Topical Talk this year. Year 6 teacher, Kate King, attended our one-day training at Barnham Court in November and subsequently took back what she'd learned to share with Year 5 teacher, Bethany. This enabled all children across Key Stage 2 to take part in Topical Talk at some point during the year.

In Year 5, Bethany delivered the Topical Talk Festival in the Spring term. She and the students really enjoyed the wide range of topics and felt that this range gave the students a great introduction to talking about the news. The students also found the opportunity to talk to other students around the world particularly exciting and motivating, with exposure to different viewpoints being a key factor in its success. They ran the Festival in their English curriculum, using the written Standpoint at the end as the focus of a writing unit on non-fiction.

In Year 6, Kate delivered the Summer Oracy Project unit on media literacy. In contrast to the Festival, this gave the older students the opportunity to learn about one theme in the news in depth. Kate points out that "to be evaluative and critical, [children] need small steps and sequential learning. This fits with our approach to mastery in the curriculum." She also remarked that the resources are "so well-structured and so much thought has gone into them", making her job as the teacher easier and that the "drip-feeding of information [throughout the lesson] keeps the engagement high" for the students.

This was seen during a visit to observe a lesson in Year 6 in the Summer term. The children were highly engaged in the decision-making activity where they role-played being news editors evaluating whether to publish a story based on new pieces of context and information introduced incrementally throughout the lesson. The students were encountering new vocabulary such as "editorial independence", "bias" and "news editor" and using these confidently and independently in their discussions. In addition, they were linking their learning to their school value of "integrity" and reflecting morally on their decisions as news editors. What was particularly striking in the class was how some students were beginning to explore the more frustrating grey area of making moral judgments. As one student commented on a government's behaviour "I know it should happen, but it doesn't". Younger children's sense of justice can often be a barrier to more complex problem solving, and understanding that the obvious "right" thing isn't always the reality provides room for more creative thinking and productive struggle, as well as preparing children for the real world.



The Headteacher of St Benedict's and the Director of Primary, Sarah McBennett, both of whom also observed this lesson, point out that Topical Talk pedagogy is "an example of inclusive practice at its best". All students in the class were not only accessing the content but actively participating in the activities, in part because "there is no opportunity to be wrong".

St Benedict's brought in Topical Talk this year as part of their oracy provision, which has and continues to be a priority for the school. When asked for feedback on the conditions for its success, Kate and Beth both indicated that seeing Topical Talk in action, in training but also in a real classroom setting, was particularly powerful.

The spiralling of Topical Talk through Year 5 and Year 6 at St Benedict's, where Year 5 are exposed to a range of news stories and Year 6 go on to "master" a theme is a great model for learning about the news in Upper Key Stage 2 as it demonstrates progression but also guarantees regularity of discussion which is key to building essential skills.



What the students say...

Year 5, student

St Benedict's Catholic Primary School, Chatham

Speaking is the best I think because I like sharing my thoughts and it is easy because Topical Talk has improved my work I think and it is very fun to do.

I love topical talk this is the best thing I have done since I have moved from Australia.

Year 5, student

St Benedict's Catholic Primary School, Chatham

I learnt to talk to my friends about loads of topics and I learnt how to listen better. I loved working on every single Topical Talk.

Year 5, student

St Benedict's Catholic Primary School, Chatham

This is a great way to talk and learn about the news and all situations all around the world.

Year 5, student

St Benedict's Catholic Primary School, Chatham

This has really helped express what I feel about people and this excellent programme has really helped me to be a kind and generous kid.



A special thanks to:

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