Extend your Understanding: Implementing "Math Talks" in your Classroom

"Math talks" are meant to be short – 10 to 15 minutes at the most – and can take place at any time during the school day, all year long. They can be used with the whole class or a small group.

Setting up the environment:

- Find a space where students can sit together as a "community" and the teacher can easily record student thinking.
- If students are to take risks and share ideas, they need to feel safe and respected. Take the time to set expectations for a math talk. Pose the question, "What counts in a math talk?" and build a list of expectations as students experience math talks.
- Establish signals such as "thumbs up" that allow students to have the wait time they need before strategies are shared.
- All ideas are valued, and welcomed. Mistakes are a part of the learning process.

Don't give up if the first math talk you try doesn't go well, or takes longer than you expected. One of the biggest challenges for students is to develop the ability to clearly and concisely articulate their thinking. For teachers, the challenge is to develop the ability to represent student thinking during a math talk. Both these skills get easier with time and practice.

Model student thinking, using representations such as equations, open number lines, ten frames, hundred charts and arrays. This will help your students make sense of the math, as well as learn to use these tools independently as they solve problems.

There are many resources dealing with discourse in mathematics. One resource with more information and samples is "Number Talks" by Sherry Parrish (Math Solutions, 2010).