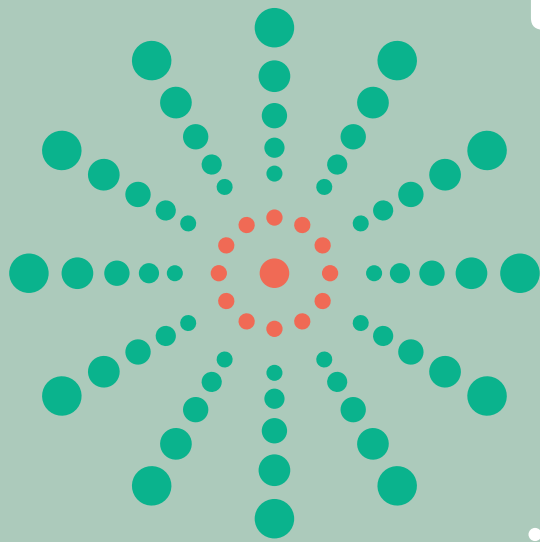


# Launching Inclusive Efforts Through Community Conversations

A practical guide  
for families, services  
providers, and communities

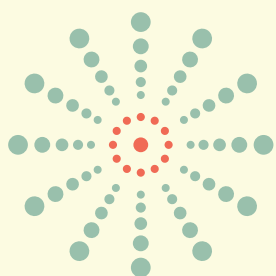


• Beth Swedeen  
• Molly Cooney  
• Colleen Moss  
• Erik W. Carter



We can create  
the future we  
want to see  
by starting  
with the power  
and connections  
we have.

The staff from the Natural Supports Project wants to extend its heartfelt appreciation to and respect for the parents who dedicated more than a year of their “discretionary time” toward developing, implementing, and reflecting on the impacts of community conversations. The creativity, generosity, and dedication demonstrated by these parents truly reflect the power all of us have as individuals in creating real community change. Their extreme patience as a crew of Natural Supports staff followed and documented their every move was an additional act of graciousness. This guide is dedicated to these parent organizers in recognition of the significant changes they made and still make in creating more inclusive and welcoming communities.

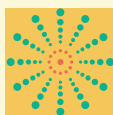


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# Introduction



Sarah had been advocating for years within her school district for more inclusive educational experiences. Because each of her four children had a different “label” that determined the program they would receive, they were attending four different schools. Despite many years of discussions with school staff, little prospect for change seemed evident—either for her own children or other students with disabilities in the district. A different approach was needed. She proposed to her local parent support group the idea of having a “community conversation” on inclusion.

Together, they sent invitations to and personally invited a broad range of community members to come together for an evening discussion focused on how they could work together to make the local schools more inclusive. More than 50 people came! Almost half of these attendees might not usually be thought of as people who would be willing to take part in an initiative addressing special education, including a county executive, a grocery store manager, school board members, and town alders. But they sure had much to contribute. The two-hour conversation—held over soda and snacks—generated

several dozen compelling ideas for how schools and the community could be more inclusive. Numerous new community partners were identified who could help. Shortly after the conversation, several “work groups” emerged to launch specific projects, including a transition “weekend camp” at the local university pairing high school students with disabilities with college student mentors, new inclusive extracurricular clubs at the high school, and a series of discussions with the school board and school services director focused on eliminating self-contained programs and creating more co-taught classrooms.

Imagine living in a place where all residents have meaningful opportunities to fully participate in their schools, on the job, and in recreational and civic pursuits that strengthen their connection to each other and the vitality of their community. Communities in Wisconsin and across the country are discovering their own ability and power to create change and improve the lives of all residents through a community organizing strategy that involves hosting community-wide conversations to elicit ideas, solve problems, create new connections, and share resources.

Drawing upon a model of intentional dialogue called the “World Café,”<sup>1</sup> these community conversations can focus on any issue of interest to a community, such as how to be more eco-friendly, how to

engage marginalized groups in community life, or how to respond to economic challenges. This guide addresses how this approach is being used to create more welcoming, inclusive communities for individuals with significant disabilities.

“We can create the future we want to see by starting with the power and connections we have.”


Despite more than 35 years since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and 20 years since the Americans with Disabilities Act, we still often struggle to fully support people with significant disabilities, as well as to foster lasting and supportive relationships for and with these individuals in our schools,

communities, and workplaces. Nationwide, fewer than 10 percent of students with significant disabilities spend the majority of their school day in inclusive settings.<sup>2</sup> Adults with disabilities are only about a third as

likely to be gainfully employed as their peers.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps one reason for the limited progress in creating inclusive opportunities has been that the full range of potential resources and supports within a community often has not been engaged in finding or offering solutions.



### The World Café

 The framework in this guide has been sourced from The World Café.

The World Café has been used in a number of contexts. Businesses and civic groups use it for strategic planning, while communities use it to address local matters like budget cuts or public school concerns. Government and non-governmental organizations use the strategy to address local, statewide, national, and international concerns like environmental issues and public health concerns. For more information about the World Café and to access numerous resources, visit their website at [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com).



<sup>1</sup>Brown and Isaacs (2005)

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Education (2009)

<sup>3</sup>National Organization on Disability (2010)

## Core principles

Community conversations using the World Café approach offer a promising way to engage the broader community in discussion and action around an issue of shared concern. This approach starts with the premise that every community is already rich in opportunities

for people with significant disabilities to develop relationships, share their gifts, learn and practice new skills, and enjoy activities. Instead of dwelling entirely on barriers to participation, community conversations are designed to explore

the often-untapped resources, creative ideas, and effective problem-solving strategies that can result when new and diverse perspectives come together around a shared challenge or concern. This community organizing approach—as it was used in our project—relies on several core principles:

- All communities possess unique opportunities, connections, resources, and relationships.
- Members within each community are the experts on the challenges that are most pressing, the solutions that are most viable, the strategies that will work best, and the most effective ways to enlist others in support of change.
- Any group of community members who come together—no matter how well-connected each individual already is—will learn about new resources, connections, and ideas by interacting with others who share different viewpoints and have different life experiences.
- Real change that lasts is most likely to come when ideas are based on locally-feasible strategies and approaches.

## What is a community conversation?

A “community conversation” is a way to bring a diverse set of community members together to collectively brainstorm strategies and resources that can be used to address a challenge facing the community (see Figure 1). In short, it provides a fun and creative way to find local solutions and new partners to address issues that matter most in a community.

These two-hour events revolve around small-group discussions and are held at a familiar and inviting community location, such as a local coffee shop, restaurant, library, or community center. After arriving, participants sit together at small tables to encourage conversations and new connections among attendees.

“[The community conversation] was something different. It was something new and . . . it was going to make a big change in these kids’ lives, and . . . I’m all for that.”







**FIGURE 1:**

What might a community conversation look like?

#### 6:00-6:15 Welcome

- Attendees settle into seats (perhaps after getting food and/or drinks).
- The facilitator/host introduces purpose of event and outlines the conversation process.

#### 6:15-6:35 Round 1: Conversation about question #1

- The facilitator poses question to group and encourages attendees to participate in discussion with others at the table.
- This question is designed in advance by the facilitators to elicit solutions, strategies, and resources that address the topic.
- The designated “table host” initiates the conversation and writes down key points made during the discussion.
- This discussion lasts 15-20 minutes.

#### 6:35-6:55 Round 2: Conversation about question #1

- After 15-20 minutes of discussion, everyone except the table host moves to a different table and continues the discussion about the same question for another 15-20 minutes.

#### 6:55-7:15 Round 3: Conversation about question #2

- The facilitator poses a new question that encourages attendees to consider what they might do to resolve the issue, or what the group can do to create change in their communities.

After the three rounds of discussion, each participant will have personally met and shared ideas with as many as 12-18 other people.

#### 7:15-8:00 Harvest

- A large-group discussion of the best ideas, resources, and strategies is held. Ideas are posted on a large poster-sized piece of paper for the group to see.
- In most situations, the facilitator or another organizer shares the key points of the conversation via e-mail with the attendees at a later date.



A facilitator or host welcomes the group and introduces the event by explaining the purpose for the meeting and outlining the conversation process. This introduction lasts about 10-15 minutes. To begin

“[Community conversations are] like a huge brainstorming—people walk away with ideas that they can literally use.”

the small-group discussions, the facilitator poses a question to the group (e.g., “What can we do as a community to improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities?”) and asks everyone to discuss the question with the 4-6 participants

seated at their table. These questions are designed in advance by organizers to elicit solutions, strategies, and resources that address the topic. One person at each table is designated a “table host” who facilitates introductions and takes notes. After 15-20 minutes of discussion about the question, everyone except the host at each table disperses to different tables and continues discussion around

the same question for another 15-20 minutes. After this round of conversation, participants disperse to new tables one last time. During this final discussion, a new question may be posed that demands more specific action. For example, the question may encourage participants to consider what they personally can do to resolve the issue, or what the group might do in the next six months or year to change their communities. After the three rounds of discussion, each participant will have personally met and shared ideas with as many 12-18 other people. After this final discussion, the facilitator reconvenes everyone for a large-group “harvest” of the best ideas, resources, and strategies generated to address the topic, which are then posted for the group to consider. Most conversation organizers share the results back via email with participants and other interested community members at a later date.





## Learning alongside parents

Community conversations are one strategy the *Waisman Center's Youth Transition*

Area of Emphasis has used to discover, support, and disseminate creative and promising approaches for supporting individuals with disabilities to participate more fully and naturally in school, work, and community activities, including the same relationships, work- and volunteer-related experiences, and community opportunities as their peers. We have sought to draw out the very best ideas and approaches for enhancing full participation of individuals with disabilities, based on the premise that most communities are full of opportunities for all residents to develop supportive relationships, explore their strengths and interests, learn important life skills, and make valuable connections. Too often, however, participation by individuals with disabilities in work experiences, school, extracurricular and community activities, social groups, and other opportunities is restricted to "special" programs that depend wholly on the presence and support of paid supports. When invited to think about the issue,

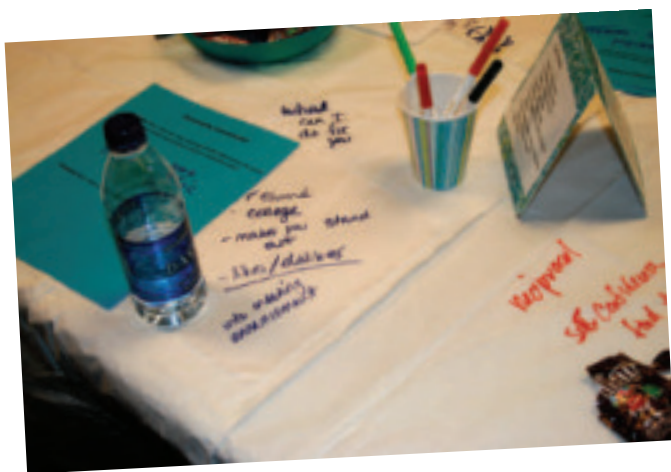
communities increasingly are discovering that it often doesn't require special services and paid supports to meaningfully include people with disabilities. Indeed, classmates, neighbors, co-workers, and other individuals who are already involved in school activities, places of business, and community programs can readily be drawn upon to more naturally support the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Typically, these individuals just need some basic information and a little guidance to effectively offer supports in existing school classes and activities, jobs, and other community opportunities. Quite often, they simply need to be asked.

Upon completion of a project that used community conversations to increase employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in high school, we organized an effort in which ten parents throughout Wisconsin received training and

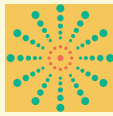


resources to host their own community conversation. We focused on parent leaders as organizers, drawing upon their connections, advocacy skills, and passion for improving the lives of people with disabilities. We observed and learned from their experiences as they planned and held their events, documenting their lessons learned for this guide. In the pages that follow, we include their stories and the lessons we learned from implementing their conversations. We also outline steps for organizing your own community conversation. For more information on our project and to access our resources, guides, and videos, please visit our website at [www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/resources.php](http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/resources.php). For more information about findings from our studies of community conversations,<sup>4</sup> see the Reference section at the end of this guide.



<sup>4</sup>Carter, Swedeen, Cooney, Walter, and Moss, in press; Carter, Owens, Swedeen, Trainor, Thompson, Ditchman, and Cole, 2009; Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, and Pickett, in press.

# Getting started



Jennifer wanted to find ways that her daughter, Kelly, could become more involved in the community, as well as the ways the community could become more involved with Kelly. She wanted Kelly to be welcomed into social events and clubs happening both during and after middle school hours. Jennifer was convinced that if community members developed personal connections to people with disabilities, they would more easily see the obstacles that get in the way of full participation and would be more willing to help remove these barriers.

In addition to wanting inclusive opportunities for her own child, Jennifer also wanted other children at Kelly's school to have these experiences as well. To begin working toward her vision of an inclusive community for all children, Jennifer decided to organize a community conversation.

She decided to focus her event on increasing the number and quality of inclusive recreational activities available to children and youth with significant disabilities, especially those happening after school, on weekends, and during the summer months.



## Choosing a focus

**T**he first step in organizing a community conversation is to decide on its focus.

Each conversation in our project focused on expanding inclusive opportunities for students with and without disabilities. A starting point involves considering what you specifically want to address using this approach. For example, you might be interested in increasing:

- Access to general education classes and coursework
- Inclusion in extracurricular clubs and after-school programs
- Involvement in social events and relationship-building opportunities
- Meaningful work opportunities for youth or adults with disabilities
- Recreational and leisure activities
- Postsecondary learning opportunities
- Civic involvement and leadership opportunities

Perhaps you already have a focus in mind. If not, here are some questions to consider. First, if you have a disability, a child with a disability, or someone else in your life with a disability, what experiences are they having right now? What types of opportunities are they experiencing that you would like to expand or deepen? What barriers are they encountering?

As a middle school student, numerous in- and after-school activities were potentially available to Kelly. Jennifer wanted her daughter to be actively involved in the life of her school and to have meaningful opportunities to interact and develop friendships with her peers, just as other students at the school did. However, if Jennifer didn't make arrangements far in advance for someone to accompany her daughter to an after-school or community event, Kelly couldn't participate. Kelly's

support needs meant that Jennifer couldn't just drop her off and plan to pick her up a couple of hours later. Jennifer wanted to increase community awareness about this challenge and to brainstorm possible solutions and strategies to overcome the problem.

Second, think about your "ideal" community. What would it look like? What experiences and opportunities would all people have?

For Jennifer, her ideal community was one that offered opportunities for all children with disabilities to participate in activities of their choice with their peers.

Jennifer wanted to use natural supports available in her community, but felt that the community members needed encouragement to offer their support.

Third, with these ideas in mind, list areas that need to change for this vision to come to fruition. For example, what needs to happen within schools, businesses, community recreation programs, or faith communities for this vision to take shape?

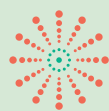
Jennifer believed that in order for her daughter to have the same in- and after-school opportunities, school staff needed to be aware of the challenge and problem solve ways to provide needed support. Jennifer did not expect the school system to carry all of the

responsibility for addressing this challenge, but she wanted them to be aware that students with disabilities may want to participate in the same opportunities as their peers. In addition, Jennifer thought students and community members needed to feel more comfortable interacting with and offering assistance to her daughter without needing permission. Jennifer wanted to use natural supports available in her community, but felt that the community members needed encouragement to offer their support.

Finally, from the ideas you generate, which one area, if addressed, would have the greatest impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families?

Jennifer wanted to focus on increasing inclusive community and school activities, but she realized this topic might be too broad for a community conversation. While making her list, she realized that social inclusion often becomes more challenging in middle and high school than during elementary school, when children are sometimes more accepting and their parents more involved in their social and academic lives. Jennifer observed that as students age, they become more independent and interested in being around peers who have things in common. For this reason, and because her daughter was in middle school, Jennifer decided to focus her event on increasing inclusive community and school activities for middle school and high school youth.

After you have selected the focus of your conversation, share it with a few people (e.g., family members, friends, co-workers) to get their impressions and feedback. Does your topic also seem relevant to them? Is it important? For additional examples of focus areas, see the sidebar on this page listing the topics parents in our project addressed.



## Parent-selected community conversation topics

- Expanding opportunities for all youth in volunteer and career development activities
- Expanding local community-based employment
- Exploring ways to ensure persons with differences in ability can more effectively participate in and contribute to all aspects of life in the community
- Increasing employment, higher education, and other opportunities for young adults with disabilities
- Determining the status and direction inclusive youth programming is headed in the community
- Informing an anti-bullying and autism awareness campaign at the middle school level
- Exploring what the community and school district can do to make sure all children are and feel included



## Is a community conversation always the best approach?

Community conversations are just one organizing tool used to create energy and direction around local change. Other community organizing strategies to consider might include:

- **Community asset-mapping:** Based on work from the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at Northwestern University, this approach is designed to identify the existing resources, opportunities, and organizations in a community with a goal of more effectively connecting with existing resources.<sup>5</sup>
- **Futures planning tools** such as PATH<sup>6</sup> and MAPS<sup>7</sup>: These approaches from the Inclusion Network in Toronto, Canada, use individualized planning strategies that any local group or organization could adopt to do strategic planning.
- **Learning circles or communities of practice**<sup>8</sup> allow an established group that is committed to meeting regularly to explore a topic or goal in-depth by applying their own experiences and learning from each other.

<sup>5</sup> Kretzmann, McKnight, Dobrowolski, and Puntenney, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Pearpoint, O'Brien, and Forest, 2001

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, Pearpoint, and Kahn, 2010

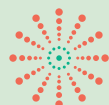
<sup>8</sup> Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002





## A community conversation may not be the appropriate method to use when:

- A group has already identified promising solutions to the challenge. In this case, a learning circle or community of practice to keep momentum and connections going may be more appropriate.
- The goal is to share information with a group of people, rather than soliciting their insights and ideas.
- Less than 90 minutes is available.
- Fewer than 12 people are gathered. In this situation, a futures-planning approach in which the group works together may be more appropriate.



## The various roles in a community conversation

There are four main roles people take during a community conversation:

- **Organizer:** The organizer(s) is the person or group (referred to as the planning team) who decides to hold a community conversation. This person or planning group plans the event by choosing the venue, inviting participants, and finding table hosts.
- **Facilitator:** The facilitator is the person who facilitates or runs the actual event. This person welcomes the group, explains the process, keeps track of time, asks people to switch tables, and facilitates the harvest at the end of the event. During the harvest, the facilitator may record all the ideas shared by writing on poster paper or the facilitator may ask someone else to do this writing. The organizer frequently plays the role of the facilitator.
- **Table hosts:** The table hosts are people who are asked to sit and stay at one table. These people facilitate the small-group discussions by taking notes of the conversation, encouraging everyone to share, and keeping the conversation on topic and focused on solutions.
- **Participants:** The participants are the individuals who attend the event and participate in the small-group discussions.

## Choosing questions

Friends Tanya and Emily worked together to organize and host their community conversation. At first, they were somewhat hesitant about the community conversation format. After all, they were tired of people talking and not doing anything. They wanted action! How could a series of guided conversations lead people to action? As they learned more about the World Café process, they realized that asking the right questions really could make all the difference.

If your community conversation event is going to culminate in practical ideas and doable strategies for expanding inclusive opportunities in your community, the event has to be solution focused. Solution-focused conversations enable participants to focus primarily on generating strategies, gaining insights, making connections, and planning next steps instead of spending valuable time discussing the obstacles. Conversations that only focus on challenges and barriers to inclusion can reinforce inaction and result in hopelessness and stagnation. Most people are already well aware of the existing obstacles. Community conversations should instead focus time and energy on generating solutions and possibilities.



**FIGURE 2: Checking your questions**

**1. Think about your questions as you consider the following ideas:**

- Do your questions simultaneously address the topic *and* encourage solutions?
- Are the questions phrased broadly enough to encourage responses from everyone who will be coming to the conversation?
- Are the questions relevant to your participant?

**2. Pose your questions to others (e.g., family members, friends) to get feedback.**

This is a great way to receive input and to see if you get the types of responses you were anticipating. It may take some tweaking to get the question just the way you want it.

The World Café model uses two strategies to keep conversations positively framed. First, organizers are encouraged to structure their events around 1-2 questions that move people toward solutions and action (see page 13, Possible community conversation questions). The World Café model uses questions to approach a topic instead of simply asking participants to discuss an idea. Meaningful questions lead people to think creatively and innovatively. Ideas that had not yet been thought of emerge when people think about and engage in conversations about important questions. Second, the table hosts seated at each table facilitate the conversations to keep them positive. We will talk about the role and responsibilities of the table host in the Organizing the Event and Art of Facilitating sections (see page 15). Right now, we address how to frame your questions.

**1. Pose only one or two questions for an event.** You may think of many questions that could be asked, but to fully explore and discuss the topic and generate solutions, we suggest posing only two questions.

**2. Ask questions that push people to think about what they can do to elicit change.** Starting your questions with “*what*” and “*how*” helps facilitate conversations about possibilities. Consider the difference between these two questions: “How can we make after-school activities more inclusive of all students?” and “Why are there barriers to including youth with disabilities in after-school activities at our school?” The first question specifically asks for strategies and ideas. The second question dwells on reasons inclusion is challenging, focusing on difficulties without uncovering solutions. Avoid questions that keep people focused on problems.

**3. Avoid questions that explore the value behind your topic,** such as “Why is inclusion essential for all people?” Although this type of question may raise awareness, it does not help people see their role in finding solutions and committing to action. Because people chose to come to your event, you can assume they already recognize the importance of inclusion. Help them take the next step by posing questions that tap into participants’ personal experiences and connections, such as “What can our community do to meaningfully employ more people with disabilities?” or “What resources do we have to support children with disabilities in summer recreation programs?”



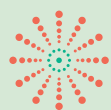
4. Make a list of several questions about inclusion that are important to and will resonate with the community.

5. Pick one or two questions from the list that stand out because they could be answered by a broad range of community members or they could uncover valuable resources or connections.

6. Write these questions in a way that encourages action and commitment.

While looking over the questions posed by parents as part of our project, we noticed two elements that seemed to be effective at encouraging action and commitment. First, consider using the words “we” and “I” in your questions. These pronouns make people consider their personal role, rather than focusing on what *other* people should be doing to increase inclusion. For example, “What can we as a community do to increase inclusive recreational opportunities in our town?” Second, consider adding a second, more specific, time-limited question to encourage participants to think about and plan next steps. For example, “What can I do in the next *six months* to increase the inclusive recreational opportunities in my community?”

## Possible community conversation questions



Below is a list of possible questions that could be used for a community conversation. Adapt any that would be applicable for your event.

### Topic: Employment

**Question 1:** How can we as a community increase employment opportunities for all youth?

**Question 2:** What can I do to increase employment opportunities for all youth?

### Topic: Inclusion of high school students

**Question 1:** What can we do to ensure that all high school students are and feel included in the extracurricular activities and classes available in the district?

**Question 2:** What can I do in the next 6 months to ensure that all high school students are and feel included?

### Topic: Post-secondary preparation and options

**Question 1:** How can we better prepare our youth for life after high school?

**Question 2:** How can I help prepare youth for post-school life?

### Topic: Collaboration between community, schools, and families

**Question 1:** What can we do as a community to better support collaboration between the community, schools, and families?

**Question 2:** What can I do in the next 3 months to improve collaboration between my community, schools, and families?

### Topic: Community engagement

**Question 1:** How can we better engage individuals with disabilities in our community and civic opportunities?

**Question 2:** How can I engage individuals with disabilities in our community?

### Topic: Community inclusion

**Question 1:** How do we build upon the strength of our communities to ensure that all citizens are included?

**Question 2:** What can I personally do in the next 6 months?

**7. Think about the questions you have drafted and consider the following issues:**

**Do your questions simultaneously address the topic and encourage solutions?**

For example, if your topic is related to increasing inclusive recreation opportunities, a question that asks for definition, such as “What is inclusion?” or “How does it feel to be excluded?” may not result in ideas, resources, and connections that change the community. If you pose your questions to two or three other people and they do not generate action-oriented responses, consider revising your questions.

**Are the questions phrased broadly enough to encourage responses from everyone who will be coming to the conversation?**

Consider the following example: “What can we do as a community to help include your child in activities of his/her choosing?” Some participants will not have children or may not have a child who feels excluded. Simply changing the wording from “your child” to “all children” makes it appropriate for all participants. Or, consider this question: “How can we as a school community be more inclusive for all students?” This question is appropriate if all participants are members of the school community—staff, families, and administration. If you will be inviting a broad cross-section of your community to the event, some people will not consider themselves members of your school community and may not have many ideas on what can be done to initiate change. Changing the wording—such as “How can we as a community increase inclusive school opportunities for all students?” or “How can we as a community make our schools more inclusive for all students?”—reframes the question and helps participants consider what their role could be as a community member for making schools more inclusive.

**Are the questions relevant to your participants?**

You want participants to see how inclusion benefits everyone and contributes to a stronger community. A few parents took particular care in developing wording that made the questions more universally relevant. For example, one parent focused her conversation on inclusive employment. Her initial questions were: “How can we get employers to consider hiring people with disabilities?” and “What can schools and families do to better prepare young adults for the work force?” However, she realized that many participants would be employers and she wanted to appeal to their particular needs and interests. She wondered what employers would have to gain by hiring people with disabilities and altered one of her questions to read: “What can I do to diversify my workplace?” She felt this question would resonate with most event participants, especially to employers. Another parent decided to focus on inclusion more generally, recognizing that many people without disabilities also feel excluded from or on the margins of their community. By asking a more general question—not specific to the inclusion of people with disabilities—more participants would see the topic as relevant and important to address. She reworded her question to state: “How do we build upon the strength of our communities to ensure that all citizens are included?”

**8. Pose your questions to others (e.g., family members, friends).**

This is a great way to receive feedback and to get the types of responses you anticipated. It may take some tweaking to get the questions just the way you want them.



# Organizing the event



When Maureen decided she wanted to do a community conversation on increasing employment opportunities for youth with disabilities, she first sought some partners to help her. She approached her local Arc and an adult service agency in her town, both of which were happy to help her organize the event. They met as a “planning team” three or four times before the event. They realized that to get employers to come to their event, they would need to host it early in the morning before local businesses opened. Having their conversation at 7:30 in the morning over coffee, fruit,

and pastries at a local café meant a greater likelihood that employers could attend. The partnering agencies had connections with employers and were integral in inviting and getting business leaders to attend. The team invited a local professional with facilitation experience to introduce the event, conduct the large-group harvest discussion at the end, and float among tables to spur conversation.



Conversely, Kristen decided to coordinate her community conversation with an established parent leadership group. Their event focused on expanding community recreation options

for children and youth with disabilities. She asked a friend who owned a local brewery if he would be willing to let her use his space for free. Because the brewery was typically closed on Mondays, her event would not compete with business. Parents in the group brought potluck dishes, limiting the expense. The publicity was also free as Kristen emailed most of the invitations. She and a friend co-facilitated the evening, which further minimized costs.

**FIGURE 3:** Sample timeline for organizing a community conversation



## Finding support

The scope of a community conversation is simple enough that a single person can definitely organize a successful event. In fact, several of the parents in our project decided to handle all of the planning and logistics themselves. They developed a list of people to invite, found a low- or no-cost community venue, generated their questions, and hosted a lively and informative discussion. However, other parents decided to form a team. This enhanced the planning process and expanded the number of different people inviting community members to attend, leading to a potentially more diverse participant group. These parents also shared with us that involving a team led to deeper consideration of how to pose questions that would lead to real change in their communities. Most parents who decided to form a team enlisted another parent

or group of parents, although one worked with a university student and two enlisted support from local non-profit human service agencies. While most parents reported being pleasantly surprised at the enthusiasm and willingness of their partners, several also expressed surprise that individuals who they thought would be excited about the effort did not choose to actively commit to the planning. Keep this in mind when forming your team. Some people will be very ready and able to assist while others may not be as available. Try not to be disheartened or lose energy on those who are not willing or able to join your efforts at this time. Focus on finding the people who are excited and available. In the end, the parents in our project found it best to combine their energy with people who were enthusiastic instead of trying to make someone want to help.





## Choosing a venue

The most important factors in choosing a location for the event are that the space is well known in the community, comfortable for participants, and conducive to creative thinking. The term “World Café” was developed because the events sought to create the intimate, pleasant atmosphere of a café where people come to relax, sip coffee, and share ideas with others. Try to avoid typical agency locations like schools or human service centers because they may be associated with a specific perspective and may not seem as conducive to informal conversations.

Many parents chose free space, such as a community center, public room at a library, or space donated by a local business. For example, one group chose a well-known museum with windows looking out over a large lake. They emphasized the value of having beautiful space to inspire participants. Most public spaces must be reserved 6-8 weeks or even more in advance.

## Creating a comfortable space

Conversations tend to be more lively when the location and set up are both inviting and functional. Make sure your room is easy to locate. If it will not be clear where people should go when they arrive at the venue, post signs that give directions to the room or have a greeter present to welcome and direct people. Participants should arrive to a welcoming space that is accessible, comfortable, and relaxing, but they also need to be able to hear one another and easily move when it is time to rotate tables. Creating a comfortable and useable space, though, does not need to cost a lot of money. Consider the following when setting up your space:

**TABLE SIZE.** Most venues will come with tables and chairs. Ideally, tables will have seating for at least four, but no more than eight individuals. We have found that having four to six people per table means there are enough people to keep the conversation going, but not so many that people have little time to share or feel intimidated to speak.

Depending on the venue, you may not have a choice of table size. Be creative and consider alternatives. If the tables are too small, push two tables together. If the tables are too big, limit the number of chairs set at the table. If a venue only offers chairs, borrow card tables from friends and neighbors. Or, go without tables by placing the chairs in a circle and leaving a pen and pad of paper on each seat for notes and doodling. If possible, avoid the large, circular conference tables that seat eight to ten people. It is sometimes hard to hear people sitting across from each other.

**LAYOUT.** Finding the right balance is important. Place tables close enough together to make the space feel cozy and intimate, but not so close that participants cannot easily move around or hear each other speak over other conversations. Everyone should be able to leave their table with ease when it is time to switch tables, get more food, or use the restroom. They also should be able to speak without competing with voices from surrounding tables. At one parent’s event, the room was quite large for the small gathering she had planned so she used a registration table to partition off part of the room for the tables. This change made the room feel smaller and more intimate.



**DECORATING.** To make the room look more like a café and less like a conference room, cover the tables with tablecloths. Although linen tablecloths are fine, easel or chart paper taped to the top works well. Scatter markers and pens that people can use to take notes, doodle, or draw. Participants can write directly on paper tablecloths or paper placemats can be included in front of each chair. At most events, parents scattered candy or confetti on the center of each table. Use flowers or plants as table centerpieces, or place them on the registration table or in other easy-to-see locations. Include a table tent that describes “café etiquette” and/or the responsibilities of the table host at the center of each table (see Figure 4). At one event, the parent organizers decorated the room by writing quotes about the importance of inclusion on chart paper and posted them on a wall (see page 29). This was very effective—it set the mood and tone for the event, cost very little, and many attendees asked for a copy of the quotes.

### Possible pitfalls:

- If you plan to hang items on the walls, make sure your venue will allow this.
- Some participants may want to keep their notes and the drawings they make on the placemats. Ideally, you will collect these items after the conversation to compile the breadth of ideas that were shared by everyone at the event.

**FOOD.** Food always seems to bring people together. Offering snacks and coffee can help you create a café-like environment. The food you provide does not need to be elaborate or expensive. Some of the parent organizers were actually surprised by how little the participants ate. When trying to decide what food to serve, consider the time of day at which your event will take place and who will be attending. If you meet in the morning, offer muffins, fruit, and coffee; if you meet later in the evening, offer coffee and simple desserts. If your conversation will include students, ordering pizza

can be a great way to get more youth to attend. If you choose a potluck, ask members of your planning team or attendees to each bring a dish.



### Foods provided by parents

- Cinnamon rolls, croissants, muffins
- Snack foods like cheese and crackers, relish trays, chips and salsa, fruit
- Coffee, juice, soda, water; one event was held at a brewery with a cash bar available
- Pizza and salad delivered by a local pizza company
- Desserts, ice cream floats, cookies, candy



### How the food was provided

- Catered by the venue, such as a restaurant, café, hotel conference room
- Members of planning group all brought an item for a potluck
- Volunteer parent group made food at home ahead of time
- High school cooking class prepared food
- Ordered/bought cheese and meat tray from grocery store

FIGURE 4: Café etiquette table tents

### Café etiquette

- **Focus** on what matters
- **Contribute** your thinking
- **Speak** your mind and heart
- **Listen** to understand
- **Link and Connect** ideas
- **Listen together** for insights and deeper questions
- **Play, Doodle, Draw**—writing on placemats & tablecloths is encouraged!!
- **Have FUN!!**

## Possible pitfalls:

- Make sure to deliver on what you advertise. If you state on your invitation that a light meal will be served, offer a light meal.
- Some venues may not allow outside food or will require you to use their catering services. Before booking your venue, make sure you can work within their parameters.
- Be sure food is set up before the first attendees arrive.

## Organizing on a budget

Organizing a community conversation does not need to be a costly endeavor. An event can cost less than \$250 and, with some creativity, it can be almost free. The venue, food, decorations, and printing of invitations typically cost money, but there are ways to keep expenses to a minimum. First, consider options that are less expensive. Second, explore sources of free or donated elements.

**VENUES.** When choosing a venue, libraries or community centers are often free or available for a very reasonable rate. These locations usually have tables, chairs, and some technology (e.g., LCD projectors, screens, wi-fi, etc.) available free of charge. Ask around to learn about other low-cost venue options. For example, one parent in our project used a beautiful community room at a local furniture store for free. Few people know this resource even existed.

**FOOD.** Depending on the number of people you anticipate attending, consider buying beverages and snacks in bulk at a warehouse retailer. If you have a planning group, ask that each member bring one or two items

to share. This divides the cost and shares responsibility.

**DECORATIONS.** Go minimal. For the tables, use chart paper for table cloths and make confetti by shredding colorful paper or using a decorative hole puncher. Bring a couple of plants from home (or borrow some from friends) to add a little green to the venue.

### PRINTING COSTS.

Depending on how large your event will be, there may be some printing costs. As we will explain in the “Inviting and Marketing” section (see page 21), it is most effective to use a number of different invitation strategies. An electronic

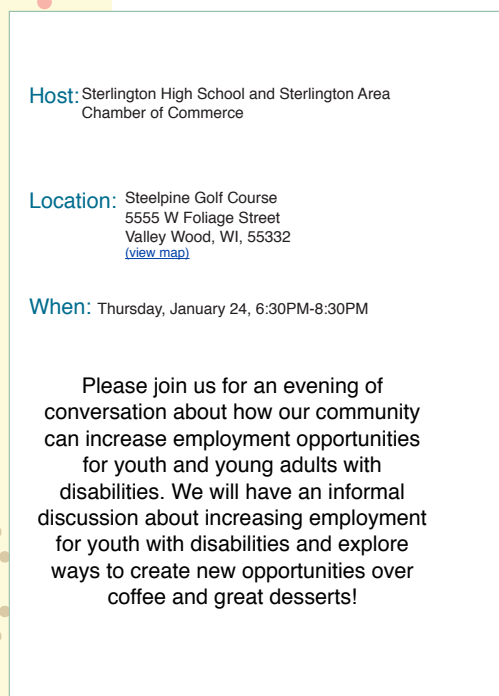
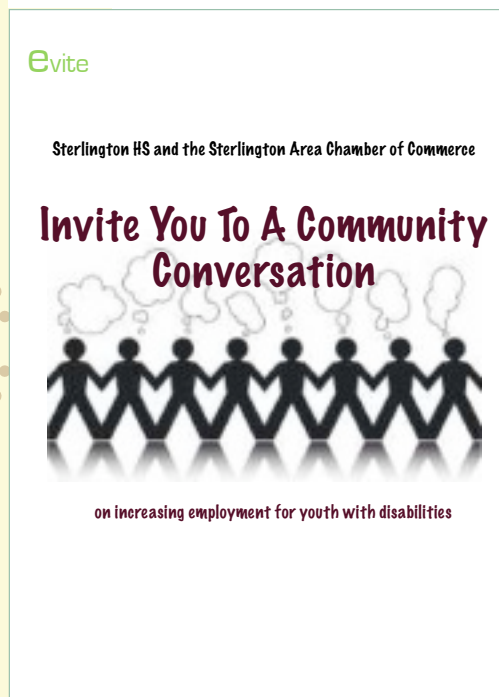
Evite ([www.evite.com](http://www.evite.com)) is an excellent way to reach a large number of people for free (see Figure 6 for an example). Invitations delivered in person or over the phone cost nothing and are usually the most effective way to draw a large crowd. Posting flyers and following up personal invitations with a flyer are good ideas. Other approaches include asking organizations to include the event in their existing newsletters or to distribute the announcement through their electronic listservs. To reduce costs, print in black and white or print on colored paper instead of with colored ink.

FIGURE 5

## Venue planning checklist

- ☐ **Parking.** If your venue has limited parking available, be sure to include in your invitation directions on where to park.
- ☐ **Equipment and electrical outlets.** Some conversations started with a video or slideshow that required use of LCD, laptop, and screen. If you will need electricity for any aspect of your conversation, check the venue ahead of time to locate electrical outlets. You may need to bring extension cords or a power strip.
- ☐ **Childcare.** Depending on who will participate at your conversation, you may want to offer childcare. This can ease the burden for some families and result in a higher turnout. One parent organizer held her event at a hotel with a water park. While the parents attended the community conversations, their children received free childcare at the small, indoor water park.
- ☐ **Registration table.** When participants arrive at the event, have a prominent space for registration. Participants can sign in (see sample sign-in sheet on page 32) and get a name tag. Someone should be at the table to welcome people, encourage them to sign in, and direct them to food, beverages, and a seat.

**FIGURE 6:**  
Example electronic invitation



**DONATIONS.** Think about who you already know. Does someone connected with your planning team own a restaurant or coffee shop? Does anyone work at one and have a good relationship with the manager or owner? Two parents in our project had space donated because they or someone they knew had a relationship with a local business. Many businesses will also donate food to support a community function. This allows them to give back to the community, and it provides free advertising for their business. Depending on the size of business, you may need to plan ahead. Larger businesses frequently have an established process for responding to requests for donations. Do not be afraid to ask.

## Deciding on a date and time

People who have lots of connections and relationships in their communities are already very busy. No date or time will fit the schedules of everyone you may want to invite. Parents in our project sought to avoid conflicts with school sports and arts programs, school board and city government meetings, and religious observations. Some chose to host their event just before a key decision-making time in the community, like several weeks before a school board budget was passed or an agency budget was due. Most chose an early weekday evening (Monday through Thursday starting at 6:30 or 7 p.m.), and some started even earlier by including a potluck dinner. As noted earlier, one parent scheduled a morning conversation to make it easier for some local businesses to attend. Another group met on a Sunday, but that time frame did not attract many community participants outside of the existing parent group sponsoring the event.





## Inviting and marketing

Events had the highest attendance when members of the planning team personally invited participants to come. Invitations and other publicity such as news releases, flyers, and posters were distributed six weeks in advance. All communication about the event listed sponsoring agencies and groups. Parents in our project had a sample list of potential agencies and organizations in each community that they might want to consider inviting (see Figure 7). Importantly, most deliberately extended invitations to people who might not initially realize their connection to disability or inclusion issues, but who were active community members, such as leaders from business groups, individual employers, city leaders, volunteer and civic groups, local policymakers, faith communities, community activists, and many others. Including a wide cross-section of participants increases the likelihood that fresh perspectives, new ideas, and unexplored resources will emerge and that new partnerships and initiatives can take shape. The e-invitation, press release, flyers, and word-of-mouth strategies also keep costs down.

FIGURE 7

### Possible participants for a community conversation

- Neighbors
- Friends
- Family
- Youth
- Parents
- Teachers and school staff
- Local business owners
- School and community recreation programs
- Clergy
- Church members
- Chambers of Commerce (Director & Members)
- Boys and Girls Club
- Directors of pupil services
- Job coaches and employment specialists
- Arc
- Residential support providers
- County social services departments
- Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)
- Habitat for Humanity
- State assembly representatives
- Transitional living facilities
- State employment representatives
- Center for Career Development and Employability Training
- Youth services programs
- School administrators
- Community Access Program
- Social workers
- Mental health centers (Hospital)
- Department of Human Services (county)
- Community non-profits
- Deans for student services (university system)
- Social Security Administration
- Supported employment providers
- School board members
- Newspaper reporters
- Superintendents of curriculum and instruction
- Community art centers
- YMCA
- Director of special education services
- State Representatives
- School district parent liaisons
- County fine arts/adaptive programs
- Mayors
- Assistant to the mayor
- University Extension staff
- State Rehabilitation Council
- Job developers
- High school transition coordinators
- Civic organizations (e.g. Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary)
- Family support centers
- University graduate students
- County Time Banks
- University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities
- Disability services at universities
- United Cerebral Palsy
- Autism Society Madison
- Epilepsy Foundation
- Down Syndrome Association





**FIGURE 8:** Example community conversation flyer

All used some sort of flyer that they could attach to an email and send out, reducing postage costs (see Figure 8). However, most also personally invited people they especially wanted to participate. Several also used a press release template (see Figure 9 for an example) to encourage media coverage of their event, and many used social media such as Facebook and Twitter announcements to further advertise the event. Prior publicity (newspaper articles, radio public service announcements) also increased participation.





**FIGURE 9:** Example community conversation press release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 27, 2012

HIGH SCHOOL, BUSINESS COMMUNITY WORK TOGETHER TO IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT  
FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

Contact: Betsy Smith, (123) 456-7890, [betsysmith@wisc.edu](mailto:betsysmith@wisc.edu)

(STELLINGTON) — Four out of five high school students with disabilities say they plan to work during summer break. Yet fewer than half that number actually landed a job this past summer.

In fact, fewer than 15% of students with the most significant disabilities worked, according to preliminary findings from a research study following students with disabilities in 34 Wisconsin high schools.

Staff from Stellington High School are teaming up with the Stellington Area Chamber of Commerce in hopes of changing those statistics by connecting students with disabilities with jobs for this upcoming summer.

One of their first efforts will be to invite the community to an evening of conversation and free desserts in hopes of gathering great ideas, untapped resources, and better connections between schools, local businesses, and the greater Stellington community.

“We have students at our school who want to work and would be very successful if they could connect with the right job,” says Emily Bowers, Stellington High School special education/transition teacher (INSERT SIMILAR QUOTE AND NAME OF SPEAKER HERE).

“We also know this is a community that really cares about its young people. We hope that by gathering the community together well before summer starts and working together, we can find the connections and supports ahead of time to increase the likelihood our students can get and keep a job, and ultimately be more successful as employees and community members,” says Mayor Richards (INSERT SIMILAR QUOTE AND NAME OF SPEAKER HERE).

The “Community Conversation” is scheduled for April 17 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Vivienne’s on West Main Street. The event is open to anyone interested in improving employment and community involvement for youth with disabilities. Business and community leaders, local policymakers, faith communities, youth agencies, families, and young people are especially encouraged to attend.

Coffee and free desserts will be provided.

For more information or to RSVP, contact Betsy Smith at (123) 456-7890 or [betsysmith@wisc.edu](mailto:betsysmith@wisc.edu) (INSERT ORGANIZER’S INFORMATION HERE).

###

## Choosing a facilitator

Anyone who feels comfortable in front of a group and understands the purpose of the conversation can act as a facilitator. Individuals are especially successful conversation facilitators if they can:

- Succinctly frame an issue,
- Relinquish control to the group,
- Redirect conversations that go off-topic while honoring participants' perspectives, and
- Identify connections and themes among the diverse conversations.

The most important facilitator responsibilities are to:

1. Frame the event so people understand why they were invited;
2. Overview expectations and etiquette to ensure everyone will feel comfortable contributing;
3. Float between tables as participants discuss the questions, redirecting the conversation when necessary to keep it solution-focused; and

4. Facilitate the "harvest" large-group discussion at the end, which connects participant ideas and leads toward proposed solutions.

Most parents in our project facilitated their own events and indicated the task was not overwhelming. One important feature of community conversations is that most of the ideas should come from the participants, not the facilitator. If you are interested in using a professional facilitator, many communities have trained professionals who can be called upon to facilitate a community conversation. You might consider contacting your county Cooperative Extension Service, local university continuing/adult education program, or inquire about private consultants trained in community organizing strategies from the ABCD Institute ([www.abcd.org](http://www.abcd.org)). For more training tips and supports for facilitators, visit the World Café website at [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com).

"I felt it was important to identify people ahead of time and I think it worked out well, because we had some control then, versus the conversation going completely off topic."

FIGURE 10

### Table host responsibilities

Thank you for serving as a Table Host for our community conversation tonight! Here are some ideas to help you as the Table Host:

- Facilitate introductions at your table
- Remind people to jot down on the table cloth and placemats key connections, ideas, discoveries and deeper questions as they emerge
- Remain at the table when others leave and welcome people from other tables
- Briefly share key insights from the prior conversation so others can link and build using ideas from their respective tables



## Choosing and preparing table hosts

The role of table hosts is to make initial introductions among people sitting at their table, take notes during each round of conversation, and help participants connect ideas and solutions from earlier conversations at the event. A list of table host responsibilities is usually placed on each table before the conversation (see Figure 10 on page 24 for an example).

While some organizers just ask someone they know at each table to take this role at the beginning of the conversation, many parents in our project asked individuals they knew in advance to act in this role. Choosing table hosts in advance enables you to select and ask friends or colleagues who you

know would feel comfortable and successful in this role. It also allows you to share with them information about what their responsibilities will be during the event. Ideally, table hosts should be comfortable redirecting conversations and keeping the conversations solution-focused. In general, people who tend to dominate conversations do not make effective table hosts. Instead, choose people who have the skills to draw out ideas and feedback from all participants. Because there should be a host at each table, you can determine the number of needed table hosts based on the number

of people you anticipate will attend your event and the size of your tables. We recommend having one or two extra volunteers in case the attendance is greater than expected or a table host unexpectedly cannot come.

### A few other tips...

- Meet with your table hosts before the event to explain the community conversation

approach, their roles within the process, and strategies they can use if participants stray from the topic or focus on problems instead of solutions. Consider sharing the example table host reference sheet as it includes responsibilities, sample agenda, and facilitation

strategies (see Figure 11). If a personal meeting is not feasible, send the group an email outlining these points and encourage them to ask any questions. One planning team that made arrangements to meet with their table hosts a couple of weeks before the event emphasized that having this time to discuss the conversation's purpose and the table hosts' roles led to richer discussions and more focused set of solutions at their conversation.

- Ask your hosts to arrive about 15 minutes before the start of the event to get settled, review their roles, and welcome others.
- Have pens and paper available for table hosts to record key ideas and strategies generated during the conversations.

**"We could not have done it without our table hosts. It would not have gone as successfully as it did... without having trained them and explaining their role."**



FIGURE 11

## Table host reference sheet

Thanks again for your involvement in this hopeful and purposeful event. These details and tips will help you through the evening. It is probably best to review them ahead of time, rather than to flip through as you are facilitating discussion.

### Responsibilities

- Facilitate brief introductions at your table—just names, so that people can address each other. No need for delving deep into explaining perspectives as that will come out with the ideas through the conversations.
- Encourage and ensure that people are jotting down key connections, ideas, discoveries and deeper questions on to the placemats as they come up. We will be using this to augment our notes that go into the action plan.
- Remain at the table when it is time for the participants to switch. Welcome your next group of participants with the same brief introductions.
- Jot down the key ideas for yourself, as you'll be sharing briefly with the next group what the previous group came up with.
- If necessary during the whole-group wrap up, get the ball rolling with a comment you heard at your table. We'd prefer for the participants to all take part in this, but if there is hesitance at the beginning, we will look to the table hosts to kick things off.

### Café etiquette

This is from the World Café website. Participants may or may not need reminders of this:

- Focus on what matters
- Contribute your thinking
- Speak your mind and heart
- Listen to understand
- Link and connect ideas
- Listen for insights to deeper questions
- Doodle and draw on the placemats and tablecloths
- Have fun!

### Facilitation tips

Here are some possible statements you might use when during the conversations:

**Tangents:** when there are long stories, personal struggles, or comments about topics other than the current question, here are a few ideas for getting back on track...

- "Let me read the question once more."
- "I see how that gives background on your perspective, but let's talk about how to progress from there."
- "Maybe that's something the 2 (3, 4) of you could discuss after the time allotted for this conversation."
- "That's interesting, but let's get back to inclusive thinking."

**Silence:** when there is a prolonged lull or when there are certain individuals not offering their thoughts...

- "Joe, we're interested in your take on that."
- "You may not have direct personal or professional impact on this question, but sometimes that's just the fresh perspective called for."

- "Think of what you enjoy about living/working in our community. Where do you go in your free time, what do you do, who do you see? What adjustments might have to be made to some of those assets so that people with physical, social, medical or intellectual differences might also partake alongside you?"
- "Let me get us started, one idea I had was... Can I get your thoughts on that or hear some of your ideas?"
- "Anything that comes to mind, we're not ruling out here and now, were compiling possibilities."

**Negativity, listing obstacles:** people who are eager to tell you that something won't work because of personal bad experience or because they can quickly list difficulties or obstacles...

- "We're going to focus on what should happen, not so much on feasibility at this point yet."
- "I understand you had a struggle in this area, thus illustrating the need to get creative about how to go about it. What are your ideas for progress here?"
- "If you must list obstacles, for each, you have to offer a possible way around it."

**Dominance:** when one person takes over the entire conversation and may even inhibit others from partaking...

- "Those are good thoughts. Let's see what other people have to say, Mary?"
- "You have a lot of experience here. Let's see what other new ideas there might be."

Overall—the goal is to keep all conversation constructive, positive, and focused on solutions, action toward progress, and gathering perspectives and ideas from all participants. Don't be afraid to use these exact straightforward words as a reminder when needed.



# The art of facilitation



Emily and Tanya  
spent weeks

focused on the details of their community conversation, including reserving a beautiful space, ordering special food, and brainstorming who to invite. They chose their fifteen table hosts well in advance and met with them two weeks before the event to explain their responsibilities and to share facilitation strategies they had compiled on a tip sheet.

At first, they felt they should hire a “professional” facilitator to ensure that their event was a success. However, after attending several other community conversations, they realized that no one would be more invested in the discussion than themselves.

They knew exactly how they wanted to frame the evening to create an atmosphere that elicits creative conversations that result in action and change. Ultimately, they decided to co-facilitate their conversation together.



## The facilitator and table hosts

**B**oth the facilitator and table hosts play a critical role in the facilitation of a community conversation. While both are responsible for welcoming participants and keeping the conversations on track, the facilitator is also charged with (a) framing the importance and intent of the event and (b) “harvesting” the best ideas, solutions, and connections at the end of the evening. The table hosts have additional responsibilities, including (a) facilitating introductions among people at their table, (b) taking notes of key ideas and encouraging participants to write down or draw out ideas on the paper placemats, and (c) briefly summarizing the main points from previous conversations after people rotate to new tables. When facilitators and table hosts pay careful attention to each of these components, community members are more likely to leave the conversation feeling it was both a good use of their time and an effective springboard for personal and collective action on the topic.

Although effective facilitation is pivotal to a conversation’s success, most parent organizers did not solicit a professional or trained facilitator. Instead, they successfully performed these roles themselves or in partnership with one other person.



## Welcoming participants

**A**n important element of community conversations that sets them apart from typical meetings is the informal and hospitable atmosphere. Facilitators can contribute to such a context by arriving early and greeting participants as they arrive. For those participants who are unfamiliar with the format and topic of inclusion, facilitators can be especially helpful in offering a personal welcome and even taking a minute to explain the intent of the evening and the importance of their perspective to the event’s success. Some organizers set up an attractive sign-in table and asked volunteers to greet and welcome participants while they personally floated around the room welcoming participants. As participants find a place to sit, the table hosts welcome them to their table and facilitate introductions.

## Framing the event

Emily and Tanya wanted to create an atmosphere that welcomed participants the moment they arrived. Throughout the room, they posted inspirational quotes highlighting the value of inclusion. They began the evening with a slide show underscoring the difference between “being present and tolerated” versus “being welcomed and valued.” Their brief overview of the evening’s conversation challenged participants to think about the importance of being a contributing, included, and appreciated member of society. Then they invited people to discuss how their own communities could move toward realizing this vision.

The event needs to be carefully framed by the facilitator so all participants understand the conversation process and their roles and potential for meaningful contributions to the issue. The most successful conversations include a broad range of community members, including people who are unaffiliated with disability or inclusion issues. However, without adequate explanation, they may



## Example inclusive quotes

“Inclusion is not just a matter of putting in wheelchair ramps and accommodating disabled kids in public schools. Real inclusion must occur in all aspects of daily life.”

—SHANNON FLORA

“We are less when we don’t include everyone.”

—STUART MILK

“What takes real skill, intelligence, and determination and results in a better place for everyone to live in is the ability to lead by inclusion, to involve everyone, and to harness the benefits of diversity.”

—SUE MORONEY

“One of the greatest things you have in life is that no one has the authority to tell you what you want to be.”

—J. ESCALANTE

“Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of man as self-sufficiency. Man is a social being.”

—MOHANDAS GANDHI

“Lasting change is a series of compromises. And compromise is all right, as long as your values don’t change.”

—JANE GOODALL

“Every single person has capabilities, abilities and gifts. Living the good life depends on whether those capabilities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making.”

—JODY KRETZMANN &  
JOHN MCKNIGHT

“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.”

—JANE ADDAMS

“Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.”

—HARRIET TUBMAN

“If you don’t like the way the world is, you change it. You have an obligation to change it. You just do it one step at a time.”

—MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

“Without leaps of imagination, or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning.”

—GLORIA STEINEM

“The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for circumstances they want, and, if they can’t find them, they make them.”

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

“We are all born included. Inclusion is the natural state, everything else is an artificial environment.”

—KATHIE SNOW

“Look into the face of a person with a disability and acknowledge that he or she was born included, then question how segregation and second-class citizenship of that person...can be justified. Keep looking and imagine the awesome possibilities when inclusion is your highest operating principle.”

—KATHIE SNOW



not understand why they have been invited. For example, a facilitator's introduction that welcomes the participants, explains the event, and connects the issue to every participant in the room helps participants understand

"We thought we needed a facilitator, and then we realized we knew how we wanted it to go, so no one could facilitate it but us—we knew where we wanted to take it."

their involvement and role. To make this connection, a facilitator can explain how the event will unfold and say, "This matters to all of us because this is our community, these are our neighbors [individuals with disabilities], these are our employers, these are our employees. We need everyone in our community to be a contributing member. This will make our community stronger."

In contrast, a facilitator who does not explain the process nor connect participants to the topic, risks having less engaged participants who do not understand their role or how they could contribute to the issue.

Framing begins with the invitation (see Figure 8 in the previous section). Notice how this event was publicized as jointly sponsored by two diverse stakeholder groups: a school district and a chamber of commerce. The rationale outlined in this invitation also underscores the mutual benefits to both individuals with disabilities and the broader community when more inclusive employment opportunities are available. Likewise, the facilitator's introduction at the

beginning of a conversation sets both the tone and direction for the conversation. At Emily and Tanya's conversation highlighted on page 28, the quotes posted around the room and the opening slideshow that contrasted the differences between being tolerated, acknowledged, and included made the case that inclusion is important and relevant to all people. By setting this tone, participants understood the relevance of the topic to their experience. Another organizer who hosted a conversation on youth employment, asked her facilitator to point to local data showing that businesses with entry-level positions needed reliable employees, and youth with disabilities needed early work experiences. The facilitator then called on the collected group to think of ways to meet both groups' needs simultaneously.

## Facilitating introductions & summarizing key points

After the facilitator has welcomed the group and framed the event, the first question is posed and the small-group discussions begin. The table hosts start by asking everyone to share their name and why they came. Extended introductions could easily take all of the time, so keep them very brief so there is plenty of time to discuss the question.

Each time participants switch tables, the table hosts facilitate introductions before the round of conversation begins so that everyone knows each other's

name. The table hosts also very briefly summarize the previous round of conversation and asks each person to briefly share one key idea or insight from the conversation at their previous table. This enables everyone to hear, connect, and build upon ideas that have been discussed, thereby deepening the discussion on the current question.

## Keeping the conversation on track

Strong facilitation ensures that community conversations lead to new solutions, connections, and resources, rather than yet another list of barriers and seemingly insurmountable problems. Both facilitators and table hosts play a key role in keeping the conversations on track. Certainly, facilitators and table hosts should honor participants' experiences and challenges, but they also should encourage and guide participants to build upon those experiences to consider how their community can change and improve.

After framing the event at its opening, the facilitator floats among tables to assist the table hosts as they guide discussions toward local solutions. An example of how a facilitator or table host can both validate individuals' experiences and guide discussion toward community change might be to say, "It sounds like you have encountered a lot of barriers. What are one or two things we could begin to do differently in our community that might move us beyond these challenges?" Other phrases that redirect the conver-



sation back to the topic include, “I’m going to pull you back to the question...” or “So what’s going to help?” If an individual does not have ideas of their own, a facilitator can turn to the entire table to ask for ideas. For example, one facilitator frequently used this approach: “John has not had a lot of success in advocating for inclusive school experiences for his son. From your experience, what could we do as a community to work on this issue together? Who do we know who could help us in this effort?”

Besides keeping the conversation on topic, the table hosts also invite everyone at their table to share their responses to the questions raised by the facilitator. While some participants will readily share their views, others may need some encouragement to voice their thoughts. A table host may try comments like:

- “Sarah, we’re interested in what you think about this.”
- “How about you, Joe? What is your perspective?”

Conversely, there may be a person who tends to dominate the conversation. Recognize their contributions and ask another participant to speak by saying:

- “Those are good ideas. Let’s see what Marta has to say about this.”
- “Who else can build on Nathan’s idea?”

During these conversations the table hosts should write down key points or thought-provoking ideas shared at their table. The table host can use this information to summarize the conversation and to share back with the organizer. Otherwise, many of the creative and compelling ideas that were discussed at individual tables may get lost. Table hosts should also encourage everyone at their table to write and draw on the paper placemats their ideas and insights. These placemats can remain at the table when everyone switches seats for others to add to, or people can bring their placemats to the next table to continue adding new ideas.

## Harvesting the best ideas and solutions

Conversations that yielded the most concrete ideas for change and personal commitments from participants tended to provide sufficient time for a large-group discussion after the series of small-group conversations at individual tables. Sometimes called “the harvest,” this final 30 to 40 minutes of the evening invites all participants to discuss together the ideas they heard during the evening that resonated most strongly with them or seemed to be the most promising. Although table hosts will have taken notes of the ideas that were shared at each table and participants will have switched tables two or three times, a time of large-group discussion allows the very best ideas to be voiced and discussed by everyone together. A good facilitator will encourage all participants to share their ideas for change, identify themes emerging across the series of small-group

discussions, and gently push the gathered community members toward a commitment to action.

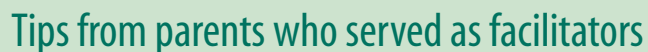
Facilitators can begin the harvest by making connections with statements like:


- “It sounds like there was a lot of great discussion. It’s time to pull it all together and think about next steps we can take as a community.”
- “It sounds like this group had a great idea. Did anyone else talk about ways to accomplish this goal?”
- “Your table had some great ideas about employment. I know other tables talked about that as well. What were other potential ideas people came up with?”

Sometimes, they can elicit a specific example that they heard at a table. If an individual does not feel comfortable sharing their idea in the large group, the facilitator can summarize the example. For example, some youth and young adults with disabilities were quite active in small-group discussions, but were reluctant to speak in front of a large group.

The facilitator also is responsible for bringing the conversation to a close at the end of the harvest, thanking people for their contributions and sharing potential next steps for the community. At most of the events in our project, participants were asked to sign in and include their email and mailing address (see Figure 12 for an example sign-in sheet). This allowed the organizers to share a summary of the conversation and one or two next steps with participants within a few days of the conversation. At two events, facilitators asked someone to type up a

Some conversations resulted in “action teams” forming that night or a few weeks after the event. Again, the facilitator is instrumental in sharing results from those teams across the larger group of conversation participants. See the section “After the conversation” for more information on follow-up steps after the conversation.



 “I like to remind people of the question sometimes, because they do get off track. But I try to do it in a way that they don’t feel like...that has nothing to do with the question. I like to say, so how does that help us think about our question. It’s good to have the questions on the table, so people can refer to them, or at least up on the wall, so people can see them. Those are things that I like to do.”

**“This is the night where we have to button our lips and ask people questions.”** This facilitator was referring to it being difficult not to talk to share her perspective, but realizing that this process is not a lecture format—it is for the participants to talk, to think about the topic, and to brainstorm solutions.

**“Go with the flow.** Definitely be willing to go with the flow. Be positive; affirm that they aren’t doing anything wrong and that there aren’t any right or wrong answers. Be open to every response; respect opinions. Even if I didn’t agree, I’d say: that’s a good point and we wrote it down. Everyone was heard.”

**FIGURE 12:** Sign-in sheet

[illegible]

# After the conversation



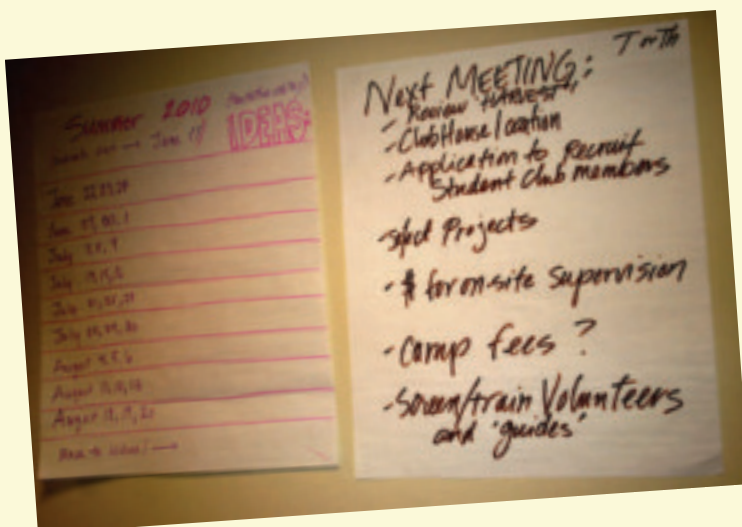
Organizing a conversation is a

significant endeavor, but it is really just a springboard to gain long-term community momentum around inclusion. Hopefully, you are reading this section as you organize your event to keep in mind a few ideas about what you would like to do to build that momentum after your conversation has occurred.

**FIRST**, have realistic expectations. Community conversations are a wonderful vehicle for creating excitement around an issue of importance in the lives of people with disabilities and their families. The organizers, planning team, and participants usually walk away from the conversation feeling energized and hopeful about what can happen next. So it can feel disappointing when a couple of weeks go by and it seems like nothing has happened. You and other members of the planning team may be busy catching up on responsibilities that were put on hold while you prepared for your event. Keep in mind that this one event will probably not “change the world” and result in a more inclusive community overnight. Try to be patient and realistic. The outcomes associated with a community conversation may not be visible for a long time and they may be subtle.

**SECOND**, consider the role you personally anticipate having in carrying out the ideas raised at the community conversation. Your own willingness to continue involvement varies greatly depending on the desired outcomes. For some parents in our project, the main goal was to organize and hold the conversation. They knew that an event would increase awareness and help participants see ways they could help make their community a more inclusive society. But, they did not necessarily see themselves playing a prominent role after the conversation was over. However, other parents desired tangible action from the event and they wanted to help new ideas take shape. This attempt to keep the energy alive can be challenging and frustrating. Our parents found it disappointing when they realized that if they personally did not work hard to sustain the energy, it would likely wane.

**THIRD**, keep in mind that one person cannot be responsible for everything. One of the main points of a community conversation is to share responsibility for change. It may be helpful before the conversation to consider what and how much you can realistically do after the event. To keep the momentum going, it is important to find other partners who can help carry out the next steps. These partners may be participants who showed strong enthusiasm for the cause and expressed interest in remaining involved. Some of our parents



are realizing that after the event, their role of organizer continued. They discovered that other people—their new partners—were motivated to put forth energy and time to complete initiatives and take action but they needed someone to lead them.

**FOURTH**, think about the kind of change you would like the community conversation to spur. For example, you might anticipate:

- Greater awareness in the larger community about inclusion and disability issues
- More opportunities for children and youth with disabilities to participate in school programs and community activities
- Creation of new work groups that focus on specific projects
- Organizing another community conversation on a more specific topic

Having an idea of what you would like to see happen as a result of your conversation may clarify what steps can come next after the event is over. It may also help you direct others to action.

**FIFTH**, during the harvest, consider issuing a “call to action” to invite people to commit to any of the ideas or projects that have been raised during the conversation. There are different ways to do this. Pass out commitment cards that ask people to list one thing they are going to do after the event to increase inclusive opportunities (see Figure 13 for an example). Pick these cards up and mail them back to participants at a later date as a reminder. Consider listing people’s names next to their ideas during the harvest. Or, at the end of the event, ask any one who is interested in assisting on a specific initiative to write their name next to the initiative or let you know of their interest.

Once you have conducted your conversation, here are some next steps to consider.

- Make sure to celebrate after the event is completed. You have taken an important first step to launching new conversations in your community. Make sure to give yourself this pat on the back.
- Contact all the participants and planning members to thank them for making the event a success.
- If you collected participants’ written notes and placemats, read through this information to see if any additional ideas emerge. Look for interesting quotes, insights, or comments that you could share with others. Keep in mind that these notes can be difficult to decipher if you were not directly involved in that particular conversation.

**FIGURE 13:** Example commitment card

**Commitment card**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Return address \_\_\_\_\_

What will you commit to after this conversation?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_





- Share the information and ideas generated at the event back with participants, planning members, and others who expressed interest, but were unable to personally attend. This is done most efficiently through email, but you can call people or meet face-to-face with key stakeholders, such as a mayor or school board member.
- When you share this information with people, invite them to act on any idea that interested them. They do not need to wait for you to initiate action. Posing a question like, "How could we get started on this?" invites people to offer next steps. This shares the ownership of the event and its results with all the people in attendance.
- Pass a summary of your conversation on to any other person or group who would be interested in it. For example, if a number of your participants were teachers who voiced ideas and strategies they would like to see their school implement, share this information with the school's administrator.
- Pass a summary of ideas from your conversation to any stakeholder or stakeholder group who needs to become aware of the community's position and perspective on inclusion and disability issues. Examples of groups you could share results with include school boards, school administrators, parks and recreation, city council, chamber of commerce, and others. This summary does not need to include specific names or contact information as it is important to protect the confidentiality of participants.
- Follow up with anyone from the conversation who expressed interest in assisting with a project or discussing ideas further.
- Create a list of participants who seemed especially interested and engaged. These people could be called upon to assist with a future project or initiative.

Other next steps after the event may come to you from participants or others in the community who heard about your conversation. You may be asked to assist with an organization's related initiative or to facilitate another community conversation for a particular group or around another topic. These opportunities are some of the surprising outcomes that can emerge after holding a community conversation.



# Conclusion

Community conversations offer a fun and well-received approach to engaging more people in an important cause, finding possible solutions, and being a catalyst for change. We have shared numerous suggestions, based on our experiences, those of the parents in our project, and World Café resources ([www.worldcafe.com](http://www.worldcafe.com)) to help you organize and host a conversation in your own community about issues that matter to you. Please do not let the many details and recommendations offered in the previous pages deter you from organizing and holding an event. The conversation process offers great flexibility—be creative and make it your own. At the end of our parents' conversations, participants completed an evaluation. Regardless of venue decorations, how well the questions were worded, or whether the table hosts were thoroughly prepared, nearly all participants (96%) across the 10 conversations felt the event was a good use of their time. Even if glitches arise on the evening of the event, participants will enjoy and gain from it, as will you. As one parent said, "The only failure is not holding a conversation." We encourage you to go for it!



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