Community Conversation Planning Guide

About this Planning Guide

Community Conversations provide school systems a chance to go deeper with their stakeholders to understand their experiences, perceptions, and preferences. They offer a way to engage a broad and diverse group of community members and stakeholders in discussion *and* action around shared priorities. As part of your broader engagement strategy, Community Conversations can provide an opportunity to generate public knowledge, wherein stakeholders are not simply asked their opinion, but they are also given the opportunity to share ideas for next steps and improvement. These sessions are *not* town halls, focus groups or gripe sessions. They *are* conversations that allow for meaningful dialogue and for all participants (districts and community members) to learn from each other.

Community Conversations should be designed to meet four key objectives:

1. Community members voice their thoughts, opinions, and key priorities.
2. Identify areas of agreement to uncover a sense of common purpose.
3. Inform your choices so that your work is more relevant to the community.
4. Develop meaningful partnership opportunities that support and sustain your vision for academic achievement.

A note on community: We embrace a multi-faceted, dynamic definition of community that considers the many aspects of students' lives. When identifying your school/district community you should be sure to embrace all aspects and identities, especially those that are traditionally underrepresented and underserved.

Community includes but not limited to:

- student's families, teachers, school leaders, and district staff;

- for-profit, non-profit, and faith-based organizations;

- community organizing and advocacy groups;

- higher learning institutions, and government and philanthropic organizations.

Steps and Considerations

These are the central steps and reflection questions you will need to answer to launch a Community Conversation. Although these steps may not be exhaustive, they should provide a basic outline of the decision points associated with the "who," "how," and "what" of these conversations. Remember as you move through the steps to always keep in mind how conversations can be used to both deepen relationships and broaden conversations with stakeholders in your community.

Step 1. Decide on Community Conversation objectives and participant groups

What are the essential questions where you need stakeholder input?

Consider your greatest challenges and opportunities and plan a Community Conversation around those. For example, you could determine what your community believes the spending priorities should be for the upcoming fiscal year.

Community Conversations should elevate voices of groups and individuals who are not traditionally represented through existing district groups and those you typically hear from. You should choose topics that warrant further stakeholder input beyond what is gathered through surveys.

Who are the right stakeholders to engage through Community Conversations on these topics?

Community Conversations provide an opportunity to elevate the voices of stakeholder groups who may be less likely to respond to surveys or whose survey responses warrant a deeper discussion. For the current scenario, we recommend engaging with 1-2 groups each of students, family members and community members to start. These participants should be representative of your local community and vary by race, gender, education level, geography, socio-economic status, etc.

Step 2. Decide who will own key roles and the breadth of their role

For each stakeholder group, will the Community Conversation be managed internally (by the district) or externally (by a community-based organization (CBO) or other group)?

External groups such as faith-based organizations, non-profits, and service providers may have greater access to diverse stakeholder groups who are less likely to respond to district surveys or calls for feedback.

If the Community Conversation will be managed externally, what are the responsibilities of that CBO managing it? Ownership of Community Conversations by an external organization can vary according to the capacity of that organization. In some cases, the CBO may be responsible only for inviting and confirming attendees; in other cases, the CBO may be provided only the protocol and be responsible for coordinating and implementing all other elements. This can include inviting and confirming participants, managing the technology (e.g., Zoom), implementing all aspects of Community Conversation, and providing a recording and transcript of the conversations to the district.

How will the managing group and participants be compensated?

Participants should be provided with a stipend or gift card in recognition of the time they took to engage. Stakeholder engagement is often expected, but the investment of time on the part of the stakeholder is not always explicitly acknowledged. We believe that people's time is valuable, and they deserve to be compensated for their participation.

Who, specifically, will facilitate each Community Conversation?

Facilitators should either be members of the community, reflective of the community, and/or have demonstrated a strong ability to build trust in a short period of time. Possible facilitation models include: a community leader and their pre-existing stakeholder group (e.g., a Minister and their congregants), a parent facilitating the conversation with other parents, and a teacher in conversation with students. Community Conversations deeply benefit when a community leader—rather than a district staff member—facilitates, and this often leads to both better attendance and more authentic responses.

Step 3. Coordinate logistics and invite attendees

When, where, and on which platform will the Community Conversation(s) take place?

Conversations can take place virtually, in-person, or a combination of the two. Groups should be offered at different times of day to ensure optimal accessibility for community members. Whichever setting you choose, keep in mind that it will have a large impact on the success of your conversation, can affect attendance, and your ability to meet your goals.

Plan accordingly for participants that will need translation support. If your invitees include stakeholder groups who do not speak English as a first language, consider offering separate Community Conversations in their home language(s) to allow for equitable and inclusive conversations. The same holds true for those with hearing impairments. Offer sign-language supports where available and enable captions if available on your virtual meeting platform.

If holding virtual conversations, TNTP recommends conducting due diligence to identify which platform your stakeholders are already familiar with, then letting that feedback guide your next steps. You may consider asking your district IT department for input, reaching out to students and families directly for their feedback, and even asking community partners that you have relationships with to see how they engage groups. And if your district is already using a virtual learning platform with communication options, then let that dictate your path. We recommend choosing a platform with minimal setup and simple connectivity via computer, tablet, or phone. Organizers should plan to open the meeting early and be on hand to troubleshoot technology for individuals.

If holding in-person conversations, we recommend selecting a location that community members frequent and are familiar with. Consider options that are considered to be a part of the community, which may mean excluding school buildings. Examples include community centers, places of worship, community sites (e.g., YMCA) and public libraries. Make certain that your site(s) can be accessed via public transportation, are centrally located, and accessible to those with disabilities.

How should we invite participants?

Invitees can be reached either through an open invitation (e.g., via the district website, social media, newsletters) or through targeted messages to individuals or stakeholder groups. If the "all call" option is chosen, we recommend maintaining a set number of "seats" for specifically invited individuals or members of traditionally under-represented groups.

You should also consider forming a sponsorship committee that represents a mix of community members that can assist you with outreach. This group should bring together people and organizations with different experiences and backgrounds that can personally recruit participants, support with promotion, and offer logistical support.

How and how often should we communicate with participants prior to and after the groups?

Participants should receive an initial confirmation with meeting information, a reminder the day prior, and a reminder the day of the event. After groups are completed, participants will receive a thank you and a summary of trends from all groups.

Should we record the Community Conversation?

It is recommended that you record the conversations with permission from participants and take scripted notes from the conversation. Scripted notes or a transcription are critical for future use in trend analysis and quotations.

Step 4. Confirm Community Conversation protocol and questions

How will we frame the Community Conversation for participants?

Consider the purpose of the groups, the participants' relationship with the district, and the participants' relationship with the facilitator. You can also add context about the goal of the Community Conversation and preview what will happen as a result of the group.

Step 5. Implement Community Conversation(s)

Before the Community Conversation

Above all, keep front and center the idea that these events are not just about gathering information from your community stakeholders, but building and/or strengthening a relationship between the district and the students, families, and broader community it serves. To that end, you may consider the following actions to make sure all attendees feel equally welcomed and appreciated:

During Community Conversation

While it's important to have a conversation protocol to keep the meeting on track, it might be useful to think of this protocol as simply a loose guide, or even as a document to return to in case the conversation stalls. The most important data you gather from these conversations may not be the answer to any particular question, but simply how people feel and engage. To foster active and lively communication, the facilitator of each conversation may want to consider the following:

- Introduce yourself. Explain your role and why you chose this profession, how you relate to the community (born and raised, lived here for three years, etc.), and your hopes and dreams for your community. Be sure to ask participants to introduce themselves and to share something similar about their lives, too, be it their hopes and dreams for their or their child's future, or simply something they love about living in the community.
- Inform participants that notes/recording will be taken, however quotes will not be ascribed to any individual.
- Do your best to ensure everyone is heard from. Not everyone will want to share their voice equally, but sometimes the people who say the least have the most insightful things to say. Also ensure that no one person or small group of people is dominating the conversation.
- It's fine and even encouraged for participants to directly address one another, provided the conversation is cordial. The facilitator does not always have to lead the conversation; they're simply there to facilitate.

At the end of the Community Conversation

- Close the conversation by making a commitment to regularly communicate with stakeholders. In particular, tell participants when and how they will see the results of this conversation shared outwardly with the community. And be sure to let stakeholders know about other ways to contribute to the direction of the district, both big and small.
- Consider sharing a link to a short survey or form where participants can share any last thoughts or questions for the district as well as give their feedback on the experience. End of conversation surveys provide attendees a chance to share details and more individualized responses than they may be willing or able to share with a large group. This survey can also give you straightforward access to participants' demographic information. We recommend including two basic questions in the survey:

- o What is your demographic information? (Break up into more specific, multiple-choice questions as needed)
- o Is there anything additional you would like to share?

Step 6. Summarize findings and report back to stakeholders

Create internal and external summaries of Community Conversation themes and illustrative quotations

Share the trend analysis and quotes from focus groups with the community via multiple channels. Community Conversation outcomes and next steps can be shared as part of a larger campaign to engage stakeholders in providing feedback or on their own.

Share themes with attendees and external stakeholder groups along with actions to be taken as a result

Share themes with participants and with the broader district community via website and social media. Include themes and quotes in future documents describing plans for the upcoming school year.